

Confronting Catastrophe: Two Books Call for Urgent Action on Global AIDS

The Invisible People: How the U.S. Has Slept Through the Global AIDS Pandemic, the Greatest Humanitarian Catastrophe of Our Time

By Greg Behrman

352 Pages. Free Press. \$36.

Moving Mountains: The Race to Treat Global AIDS

By Anne-Christine d'Adesky

487 pages. Verso. \$45.

Invisible graves line the fields of faraway lands. Therein lie invisible people—25 million of them—all laid to rest by one of the most lethal scourges in the history of mankind. Hundreds of millions of empty graves await those who may follow.

— from *Invisible People*

As a young person deeply committed to social change I once spent nearly a year working with AIDS patients in the slums of Bangkok. Many of the people I worked with there were mothers and babies infected with HIV. The most innocent victims were the children, whose short lives were defined by uncertainty, pain and suffering. At that time the Thai government generally turned a blind eye to the disease, and popular knowledge was most often based on local folklore. Victims became social outcasts, shunned by society and denied comfort and care. Once they contracted the disease their future was decided. No expensive antiretroviral drugs were available—the money was not there. It was simply assumed that anyone infected with HIV were destined for an early grave.

I will never forget the day an AIDS patient died in my arms. This experience was to profoundly affect my entire worldview. That day I became more convinced than ever that as human beings we must all make a commitment to ending the horrors of global AIDS. The patient whose life slipped away in front of my eyes was one of more than 25 million people to die of the disease. At present more than 40 million people around the world are HIV-positive. Each is an individual, unique and irreplaceable. We must do everything in our power ensure that no more lives are destroyed by this illness.

I applaud the recent publication of two books that discuss responses to the global AIDS crisis and offer compelling arguments for collective action. In *Invisible People*, Greg Behrman, coordinator for the Council on Foreign Relations Roundtable on Improving U.S. Global AIDS Policy, traces the evolution of the U.S. government's position on the global AIDS pandemic beginning in the early 1980s. In *Moving Mountains*, journalist, filmmaker and long-time activist Anne-Christine d'Adesky explores the challenges we face in treating and preventing the spread of HIV worldwide. While Behrman examines factors affecting the supply of resources to combat AIDS globally, d'Adesky documents the growing demand for them. To their credit, both authors address AIDS as a multifaceted medical, social and political tragedy requiring an international response.

Invisible People considers the rise of AIDS as a policy issue in the U.S., investigating why presidents from Reagan to George W. Bush repeatedly failed to take action to save lives. Behrman's work draws upon more than 200 interviews with political insiders, policy-makers and intellectuals privy to the halls of power of the White House, CDC, WHO and UN. The result is a riveting narrative that incorporates the suspense and intrigue of a fast-paced thriller into a sustained attempt to understand seemingly incomprehensible inaction in the face of catastrophe. Behrman's account is one of politics, ignorance and denial as well as selflessness, courage and determination in the face of adversity. Behrman manages to provide a balanced perspective, considering both the good and bad in those in the upper echelons of various administrations. *Invisible People* chronicles bureaucratic inertia, unproductive turf wars and misplaced priorities as well as the valiant efforts of numerous public health officials, bureaucrats, public figures, international leaders and the UN to draw attention to the problem in the face of runaway infection rates.

Behrman's thorough research reveals that the struggle to recognize and address global AIDS in the U.S. has been an uphill battle. When the disease was first discovered in the early 1980s, Regan simply refused to acknowledge it. During George H.W. Bush's time in office the issue "never registered as a priority". Rather than dealing with the problem, his administration moved to bar individuals with HIV and AIDS from entering the U.S. Clinton's approach, meanwhile, was to encourage programming while doing little to mobilize the resources necessary to make it a reality. His successor George W. Bush initially had little interest in the issue, but by 2002 he had undergone "a 180 degree turn global AIDS", proposing the Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief which called for the U.S. to spend \$15 billion over five years on the treatment of global AIDS. Behrman notes that while the initiative was "historic", spending has not materialized as promised and "measured against the potentiality of a world likely to host hundreds of millions of HIV infections remains wholly inadequate".

In Behrman's view, the reasons behind the most lethal policy failure in U.S. history are varied and complex. Against the background of Africa's diminished strategic importance after the end of the Cold War, congressional opposition to foreign spending meant funding for treatment and prevention was not forthcoming. Negative stereotypes surrounding HIV and AIDS led to discomfort among conservatives about addressing the subject. In many quarters, a "passive racism" ensured that initiatives were not proposed, let alone opposed. As Behrman writes, "The historical record is unlikely to reveal any instances of policy-makers opposing engagement in the issue because black Africans were dying. Rather, there was simply less of an impetus to move policy because black Africans were dying". Frustratingly, health officials were slow to offer reliable statistics that could provide the basis for action. Moreover, African leaders were themselves reluctant to acknowledge a problem. In early years, domestic activists turned inward rather than outward. For too many, writes Behrman, AIDS was just another "part of one long uninterrupted narrative of death and suffering in a far away land".

At its best, *Invisible People* is a provocative insider's look at the rise of the global AIDS pandemic from the standpoint of the elite. As such, it does less to address the role of

grassroots activism both at home and abroad in promoting change, or explore the impact of pharmaceutical companies in sufficient detail. Significantly, the “invisible people” of the book’s title remain, for the most part, in the background. In contrast, d’Adesky reports from the front lines of treatment and prevention programs, examining the challenges of providing resources and support to more than 40-million HIV positive individuals worldwide. Hers is a book that explores what is happening on the ground, profiling the gap between available resources and those so desperately needed. D’Adesky offers field reports from diverse countries including Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, India, Mexico, Morocco, Russia, South Africa and Uganda. She considers obstacles to universal access to life-sustaining antiretroviral drugs, and explores the different and sometimes conflicting agendas of donor and recipient governments, activists and individuals seeking treatment. She examines the mixed success of various programs, and condemns regulations that impede access to generic medications, declaring access to treatment a human rights issue. D’Adesky considers the potential of current treatment programs and prevention efforts and, like Behrman, she warns of the dangers of failing to support these programs. She too focuses on the shortcomings of the U.S. government as well as Western governments more generally, issuing an impassioned call for action. Although d’Adesky’s account has been criticized for alleged inaccuracies—the most widely publicized one regards U.S. spending—she succeeds in giving a human face to the global AIDS pandemic.

In highlighting the gap between the potential and actual accomplishments of the U.S. and other Western governments in the race to stem the tide of global AIDS, Behrman and d’Adesky encourage us to think more deeply about what *could* be accomplished in the future given sufficient political will. In framing global AIDS as a pressing issue of national and global security and a humanitarian tragedy of epic proportions, both authors point to what *must* be accomplished in order to avert disastrous consequences around the world. Their efforts provide us with a heart-wrenching look at the success and failures of our efforts to respond to this catastrophe. They inspire us both to ensure the mistakes of the past are not repeated, and to actively create a brighter future for generations to come.

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