

Medicine by John Grauerholz, M.D.

'No Manhattan Project'

Admiral Watkins's motto betrays the weakest part of the report to the Presidential Commission on AIDS.

In the third part of his recommendations to the Presidential Commission on the Human Immunodeficiency Virus Epidemic, commission chairman Admiral James D. Watkins (ret.) addressed the area of basic research and drug development. Of the three sections of the report, this is the longest and most detailed—and the weakest. Its weakness does not derive from a lack of useful recommendations, of which there are many, which taken together could form the nucleus of “an integrated national strategy” to deal with the AIDS epidemic.

The weakness is spelled out in the press release accompanying the report, which summarizes “The Chairman’s recommendations for enhancing basic biomedical research.” The first recommendation is “Expansion of investigator-initiated grants. (No ‘Manhattan Project’).” Following this is a laundry list of recommendations in the areas of scientific manpower recruitment and training, increasing administrative and research personnel, expediting drug and vaccine trials, community outreach programs, construction of research facilities, and standardization of protocols and computer software.

The coexistence of the concept of “an ‘integrated national strategy’ to deal with the AIDS epidemic,” with the specific formulation “(No ‘Manhattan Project’)” in the press release indicates a certain fragmentation of thought process, one might say an administrative schizophrenia. The genesis of this schizophrenia is the attempt to reconcile a collection of con-

tradictory illusions into a consensus to “crisis-manage” a reality which all of these illusions, in one way or another, seek to deny.

Looking at the actual recommendations, one gets the impression that what is being proposed is, in fact, a “Manhattan Project” without a coherent mission orientation. For instance, the report recognizes that “HIV research is expected to have high yield benefits to Americans who suffer from cancer, viral, and immune-related diseases, which collectively kill an estimated 650,000 individuals each year. Research areas that require additional long-range funding include, but are not limited to: Virology and molecular biology; Immunology; Cellular biology, pathogenesis, and host genetics.” In addition, there is even acknowledgment of the need for research on co-factors, although we are then informed that these are psychoimmunologic co-factors.

The best way to understand the problem is by an analogy with the Strategic Defense Initiative program. The SDI was proposed as a response to a problem as potentially devastating, in its own way, as the AIDS epidemic. In terms of implementation there were two basic positions. One position was that of economist and presidential candidate Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., who called for a crash “Manhattan Project” approach, utilizing “new physical principles” from the frontiers of research, which would function as a “science-driver” to spin off advanced technologies into the general economy. The other approach

was the “High Frontier” of former Air Force Lt. General, Danny Graham, which called for utilizing “off the shelf” technology to create kinetic-kill weapons, or so-called “smart rocks,” to throw at incoming Soviet missiles.

General Graham was also well known for his interest in “psychic” studies, and it may not be entirely accidental that this is the one “new” area of research which is specifically mentioned in Watkins’s report, whereas no mention is made of such areas as optical biophysics, which have the potential to shed new light on the fundamental biology of the life process. On the other hand, it may simply be the case that none of the “more than 350 witnesses in virtually all the AIDS-related disciplines—including many persons with AIDS,” mentioned this aspect of research.

After five years, in spite of impressive achievements in the face of inadequate funding, the new physical principles have lost out to General Graham’s rock throwers. The cause for this failure to exploit technological breakthroughs immediately within our grasp was the ideological fixation on short-term cost effectiveness which pervades the current administration and a substantial portion of the U.S. military establishment since Robert S. McNamara’s tenure as Secretary of Defense.

The research recommendations of Admiral Watkins are in many ways coherent with a “High Frontier” approach to the problem of AIDS. The proposed areas of research may or may not actually produce a vaccine or cure for HIV infection, but they will not offend the majority of opinion in the scientific establishment. Also, by specifically disavowing the “Manhattan Project” approach to the problem, they do not offend the “free market” ideology of the Reagan administration.