

A REPORT OF THE CSIS
GLOBAL HEALTH POLICY CENTER

Lessons Learned from AIDS 2012

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November 2012



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OUR FUTURE

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LESSONS LEARNED FROM AIDS 2012 FRIENDS IN NEED ARE FRIENDS INDEED

*J. Stephen Morrison and Suzanne Brundage*¹

AIDS 2012's Success

From July 22 to July 27, 2012, Washington, D.C., was host to the International AIDS Conference, the biannual Super Bowl of global health and the preeminent forum for reviewing the science, policy, programs, and politics in the fight against HIV/AIDS.²

In some respects, the conference was historic before it even began, as it marked the dramatic return of the conference to U.S. soil after a 22-year hiatus. This achievement was made possible because the U.S. legislative travel ban on HIV-positive individuals, in force since 1987, had finally been lifted by President Barack Obama in late 2009.³

The Obama administration and others feared that the conference would trigger divisive confrontations, as had happened in San Francisco 1990 during the last conference in the United States, and that the polarized, partisan rancor of the United States' heated 2012 electoral seasonal would spill into the conference. There was worry that congressional members who were proud of U.S. achievements, but feeling the United States was overcommitted financially, might clash with advocates clamoring for dramatic increases in funding. Yet, despite the oppressive heat of the hottest July in Washington's history, the atmosphere at the conference was upbeat and the outcomes were impressive.

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² For an excellent background analysis, see Katherine E. Bliss, *The International AIDS Conference Returns to the United States: Lessons from the Past and Opportunities for July 2012* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, March 2012), http://csis.org/files/publication/120327_Bliss_InterAIDSConference_Web.pdf.

³ For background on the origin of the ban and the consequences, see Phillip Nieburg et al., *Moving Beyond the U.S. Government Policy of Inadmissibility of HIV-Infected Noncitizens* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, March 2007), <http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/movingbeyonadinadmissibility.pdf>.

Attendance exceeded 24,000 participants from 183 countries—including people living with HIV/AIDS, advocates, scientists, policymakers, celebrities, philanthropists, parliamentarians, and faith leaders, as well as approximately 1,000 media and almost 1,000 youth volunteers. They fanned out across the conference’s 194 sessions, under the common thematic tent of “Turning the Tide” on HIV/AIDS.

In addition, AIDS 2012 helped reinvigorate a broad public discourse across America on efforts to combat HIV/AIDS at home and abroad. The conference generated considerable pride in the achievements of the past decade in battling HIV/AIDS, driven forward in many instances by high-level U.S. leadership and enduring bipartisan support in Congress. Despite the continued elusiveness of a vaccine or cure, there was new excitement that an “AIDS-free generation” might be achieved through advances in biomedical tools such as treatment to prevent HIV; male circumcision; and mother-to-child transmission prevention (PMTCT).

High-level science visibly returned to the conference, as did, surprisingly, a renewed enthusiasm for research on a cure. Both Dr. Francis Collins, head of the National Institutes of Science, and the renowned Dr. Anthony Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, were strong and consistent on the opportunity to make dramatic changes in the epidemic’s trajectory. They each made the powerful point that the U.S. investment in research, with consistent congressional support, had changed the AIDS epidemic, achieved significant progress, and if sustained, held out hope for significant gains into the future.

The tantalizing prospect of an AIDS-free generation also triggered a constructive, realist critique and an appeal for caution and recognition that many prevention tools are not yet available. It remains to be seen if these biomedical tools can really be brought to scale and have the intended impacts in lowering transmission of HIV. Resources are scarce, and lofty slogans can invite disappointment and disillusionment.

And although many sex workers and drug users participated remotely from hubs in India and Ukraine, a significant number did come to Washington, where they were welcomed and provided ample space both inside the tent and in prominent places in the program.

Overall, the conference’s message to Americans and other audiences was overwhelmingly affirmative. The Obama administration renewed its global leadership on HIV/AIDS on the opening day, July 23, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s stirring address spelling out the AIDS-free generation strategy and committing to an implementation blueprint by December 1. While neither President Obama nor former president George W. Bush addressed the conference, the former did host a White House reception later in the week for more than 200 HIV/AIDS leaders. Former first lady Laura Bush eloquently addressed a special session, and former president Bill Clinton did a sterling job at the closing plenary in encapsulating the week’s meaning. Senior congressional leaders of both parties and chambers, joined by American and other faith leaders, used the conference as a platform to voice similar messages: that their combined efforts, in partnership with many others, were saving and enhancing millions of lives; and that this exceptional instance of U.S. leadership, stretching back a decade, backed by consistent bipartisan support, will carry forward into the future.

Obstacles along the Way

In the afterglow of the conference, it is easy to overlook the very real challenges that jeopardized its success.

But by mid-2011, it was eminently clear to two key American health leaders chosen to direct the conference, U.S. cochair Diane Havlir and president-elect of the International AIDS Secretariat Chris Beyrer, that hosting a fruitful conference was by no means guaranteed. It would require delicately navigating the U.S. climate, which in the 2011–2012 period was increasingly defined by political and economic turbulence. Many worried that growing polarization in Congress, election year politics, debt and deficit concerns, and prior negative interactions among U.S. officials and the International AIDS Conference would get in the way of reenergizing domestic support for an ambitious AIDS agenda and would compromise the bipartisan coalition that supported HIV/AIDS efforts.

And as the conference organizers faced these politically sensitive challenges, they increasingly came to realize that there were too few ready tools at hand.

The International AIDS Secretariat (IAS) and the 45-person Conference Coordinating Committee (CCC) were too bound by processes and procedures, too remote, and too infrequently engaged to chart a smart strategy for managing the complexities of the Washington environment. The IAS was also incapable of devising powerful media messages or a pithy communiqué that could connect effectively with an American audience.

Affiliated UN agencies, such as UNAIDS, UNICEF, WHO, and UNDP, were preoccupied organizing their own sidebar promotional events to be of much help in shaping the AIDS 2012 program, recruiting hard-to-get high-level speakers, or honing communications. Far too often, indeed, these UN partner agencies' elaborate satellite events on Capitol Hill and elsewhere competed directly with AIDS 2012.

The Obama administration experienced considerable difficulty embracing its role as host. On the positive side, the White House lead emissary to the conference organizing committee was fully engaged and highly skilled in negotiating with the American advocacy community. Secretary of State Clinton and Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius took keynote spots in the program, as did other very prominent respected personalities such as Francis Collins and Anthony Fauci. At another level, the Obama administration was chronically ambivalent toward the conference, clumsy, and risk averse. Decisionmaking was often dominated by the politics of the presidential campaign and a desire to minimize any risk that the conference would create an opening for Republican attacks. At the daily operational level, many administration officials were stuck in bureaucratic defense mode throughout the yearlong preparations.

In Dallas, President Bush was far away, and channels of communication through former senior officials were unreliable. AIDS 2012 seemed to present a historic moment to acknowledge and thank President Bush for his achievements, but regrettably, resistance built up from multiple directions: from the CCC, which contained European and North American contingents that were vocally anti-Bush; from Bush's own close advisers, who remembered the public insults delivered by protesters to

Tommy Thompson, former secretary of health and human services, and to Randall Tobias, former head of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), at earlier conferences; and through not-so-subtle admonitions from the Obama administration, which preferred to take a low-profile, controlled approach to the conference.

The American faith constituency also carried bad feelings borne of past experiences with the conference and stood aloof and skeptical. Meanwhile, some members of Congress from both parties were eager to join the conference but unsure of their role or how to initiate a conversation with the organizers; they too required serious engagement before they would step forward.

The American Friends of AIDS 2012

Confronted with these realities, Havlir and Beyrer approached the CSIS Global Health Policy Center with a proposal: to establish a small, high-level body that could advise on issues specific to the American political context. In August 2011, after sign-off from the Conference Coordinating Committee, the American Friends of AIDS 2012 was launched.

The group first met on August 18, 2011, and on a near monthly basis after that. It comprised of 26 members, drawn from think tanks, universities, advocacy groups, congressional offices, businesses, media, and the faith community. While the organizers wanted to be inclusive, it was also critical to keep the group small and manageable. Members were enlisted on the basis of experience, bipartisanship, expertise, and, to a limited extent, availability. An additional effort was made to welcome representatives of the Obama administration as liaison members—including officials from the White House, Office of the Global AIDS Coordinator, and the National Institutes of Health—as well as representatives from UNAIDS and the IAS local secretariat. At several sessions, other experts joined to speak on special topics.

The Friends group was always intended to complement, not duplicate, the Conference Coordinating Committee. As originally conceived, the group was intended to advise on how best to:

- leverage active support by Congress;
- help shape IAS's meta-messages to the U.S. media;
- encourage coordinated activities by the university, think tank, and domestic advocacy communities; and
- recruit high-level U.S.-based speakers to the AIDS 2012 program.

Each meeting lasted two to three hours; the agenda began with updates from Havlir and Beyrer, and then focused on problem solving. Although the sessions were confidential, detailed summaries were shared with members after each session, both those physically present and those joining remotely. Over the 11-month period, 20 to 25 members joined each session. High attendance built on itself: as each session grew more energetic and compelling, which advanced a feeling of solidarity and enthusiasm among the core participants.

Tackling Tough Issues

It was essential that the group focus intently on a small set of concrete problems of high importance to the conference leaders; that targeted scope and set of goals would both preserve enthusiasm among members and best serve the interests of Havlir and Beyrer. Several issues were discussed at length at several occasions across the year, including the recruitment of high-level American speakers; outreach to the U.S. media; understanding the quickly evolving American opinion climate; the status of the domestic HIV/AIDS epidemic and sensitive flash point issues such as rising waiting lists for antiretroviral treatment; the FY2013 budget projections for U.S. foreign assistance; and the future of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

At the same time, the Friends group concentrated on three priority areas:

1. *Engaging Capitol Hill.* The conference's close proximity to the Hill made some, particularly those in the Obama administration who had been on the receiving end of congressional backlashes against earlier conferences, anxious that it would draw unwanted scrutiny from members of Congress. During past international conferences, some members of Congress had voiced objections to conference expenses and the anti-American protests that often accompanied proceedings. The key question posed to the American Friends was how to avoid such a confrontation.

The strategy that developed involved engaging early with key members of Congress, directly acknowledging and thanking members for the critical role Congress played in supporting PEPFAR and the Global Fund, appealing to a sense of stewardship for preserving those achievements into the future, and recruiting both Republican and Democratic members into the AIDS 2012 program.

On June 6, 2012, CSIS hosted a high-level private dinner with Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC), which facilitated the invitation to deliver a speech at the conference's opening plenary. He was joined at the plenary by Senator John Kerry (D-MA), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

That same dinner was also the occasion to enlist former Senate majority leader Bill Frist (R-TN) to organize a bipartisan congressional special session on the third day of the conference. Panelists included Representative Barbara Lee (D-CA), Senator Chris Coons (D-DE), Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL), and Senator Mike Enzi (R-WY). Though temporarily disrupted by hecklers, the special session was an unprecedented, remarkable display of senior congressional leaders explaining why and how a strong bipartisan core of support persevered in supporting U.S. global leadership on HIV/AIDS, malaria, and related programs. In a period of budget uncertainty, it powerfully reaffirmed the commitment to sustain robust U.S. appropriations for global health. Senator Frist made the point that at a moment when Democrats and Republicans appeared unable to agree on anything, they were somehow able over the past decade to cooperate consistently to back U.S. leadership on HIV/AIDS.

On July 11, 2012, the American Friends group also cohosted with the Congressional HIV/AIDS Caucus a preview of AIDS 2012, featuring presentations by Ambassador Eric Goosby, U.S. global AIDS coordinator; conference organizer Chris Beyrer; Grant Colfax, head of the White House Office of National AIDS Policy; and Mark Green, former ambassador to Tanzania and former Republican member of the House from Wisconsin. Sixteen members of the House of Representatives and 39 senior staffers from the House and Senate—both Democrats and Republicans—participated.

2. *Involving the faith community.* There is growing recognition in the United States that the faith community needs to be at the table in order to maintain diverse support for HIV/AIDS efforts. The U.S. faith community had been a key source of inspiration behind President Bush's creation of PEPFAR, and faith groups continue to play an essential role in global HIV/AIDS programs, often providing care and treatment in remote areas and to the world's most vulnerable people.

In the year leading up to AIDS 2012, however, many church leaders were privately expressing deep feelings of resentment toward the International AIDS Conference. These leaders felt that at past conferences their work had been ignored or sidelined, and few had higher expectations for AIDS 2012 in Washington. Some leaders weighed boycotting the conference and eventually opted to attend a faith-themed HIV/AIDS conference organized at Georgetown University for the same week. These sentiments threatened a fissure in the U.S. coalition of support.

On this issue, the American Friends took direct and immediate action, including by recruiting two faith leaders into its membership. Havlir and Beyrer drew on these members' expertise to better understand the root of resentment within the faith community, and they sought the community's input on avoiding those mistakes during AIDS 2012.

After these small confidence-building steps, the group decided to host a public forum on the faith contributions to global health in January 2012 at CSIS, moderated by Diane Havlir and including opening comments by Chris Beyrer. More than 200 people gathered at CSIS to hear Kay Warren of Saddleback Church, Anita Smith of Children's AIDS Fund, Carolyn Woo of Catholic Relief Services, and Kent Hill of World Vision discuss their work and expectations for AIDS 2012. That evening, a small dinner with the panelists, members of Congress, and Diane Havlir further cemented goodwill among the participants to change the dynamic between the International AIDS Conference and U.S. faith leaders.

Of all the issues the American Friends grappled with, this was the area of challenge where it found the most success. There was a change in outlook within the faith community toward the conference and a more open embrace of faith leaders in the AIDS 2012 program. The faith community was visible in almost all facets of the conference. Faith leaders were invited to the White House for a special reception with President Obama. The July 24 faith summit at Georgetown University also benefited from greater visibility. President Obama, President Bush, and Governor Mitt Romney all sent videos to the Georgetown gathering.

3. *Honoring the Bush administration.* The third major issue the American Friends attempted to address was including President Bush in the AIDS 2012 program. The Bush administration had had an uncomfortable relationship with the International AIDS Conference; senior administration officials were heckled by protesters at the Barcelona (2002) and Bangkok (2004) conferences. Despite this history, Havlir and Beyrer felt strongly that President Bush should be invited to speak at the 2012 conference, out of respect and fairness toward the Bush administration's achievements. The American Friends strongly supported this view.

The CCC initially resisted the idea, but with the help of the American Friends, Havlir and Beyrer further developed the case for including the former president and thought creatively about how to make the invitation most appealing to him. In the end, however, the overture to President Bush failed. Intermediaries were unreliable. The Obama White House's ambivalence discouraged Bush attendance, as did the CCC's continued negative sentiment. In retrospect, enlisting the former president was a bridge too far; fortunately, former first lady Laura Bush graciously agreed to address a special session and delivered a powerful statement on the cervical cancer partnership, the Pink Ribbon/Red Ribbon initiative, she has spearheaded.

Friends in Need

The American Friends of AIDS 2012 filled an important gap, contributing to the conference's success in tangible ways—most specifically with respect to engagement from Congress and the faith community. More generally, the diverse, dynamic, high-level group quickly demonstrated its commitment to helping the organizers achieve success in a confidential, trusting environment, focused on sensitive and politically charged issues emerging within the Washington and broader American environment.

The Friends' success rested on four key factors:

1. *Clear values.* The group's core values were made clear from the beginning, often repeated, and embraced: it was to be diverse, nonpartisan, inclusionary, confidential, civil, and committed to helping the organizers achieve success.
2. *CSIS's reputation.* CSIS's neutral status, its exceptional convening powers, and the reputation of its Global Health Policy Center greatly helped in standing up the group and sustaining it organizationally.
3. *Focus on results.* There was a conscious effort to create momentum—to keep members excited about and committed to participate actively in the American Friends. The meetings kept to a tight agenda and were focused on solving priority problems and demonstrating results.
4. *Strong leadership.* Most importantly, the conference's exceptional organizers, Chris Beyrer and Diane Havlir, were true leaders who knew what they wanted from the Friends and clearly communicated their needs and expectations. Each personally invested in directing its work and quickly established a trusting relationship with the group. In some cases, they asked several individuals for extra, focused assistance, and empowered the group to develop new ideas.

Looking Ahead

The next conference, AIDS 2014, will be held in Melbourne, Australia, from July 20 to July 25, 2014. While the American Friends, by definition, dealt with challenges specific to Washington and the broader American context in the run-up to AIDS 2012, the organizers of the next event may similarly benefit from a reliable, locally rooted mechanism to address sensitive, complex political challenges. They too may find they face a deficit of useful ready-made political tools and wish to innovate through a Friends group.

Should that be the case, the basic model for success is clear.

First, conference leaders have to want such a tool, be willing to take risks, and take deliberate steps to empower the group and communicate clearly to its members the priority needs and expectations.

Second, the group will require an institutional home with strong convening power and legitimacy, and it should be composed of diverse opinion leaders committed to working assiduously and confidentially to bring about the conference's success.

Finally, the group needs to set a clear agenda, focused on helping resolve a select number of priority problems; achieve early success to demonstrate value and create momentum; and move forward confidently from there.

Megaconferences are by definition difficult to manage effectively. The International AIDS Conference, no surprise, is no exception. Moreover, the IAC, as the iconic, biannual global health Super Bowl, is not likely to fade in importance any time in the future, even as its scale, format, and mix of priorities are modified to adapt to different times. Nor is the quality and effectiveness of the IAC leadership going to decline as a pivotal factor. Certainly AIDS 2012 achieved success, thanks to exceptional leadership and the very hard work and dedication of many individuals, countries, activists, scientists, international organizations, and others, despite considerable challenges and constraints. The American Friends Group, thankfully, was allowed to be part of that story.



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