Balancing Act



Surgeon General David Satcher, seated second from right, has faced challenges his first year.

A year into job, Satcher still shaping role

BY LAURA MECKLER THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON - A year after taking a job that's been a magnet for controversy, Surgeon General David Satcher has steered clear of politics and stayed away from the fray, quietly traveling the country as he picks his priorities.

It's kept him out of trouble and the same cannot be said for his predecessor, Joycelyn Elders. But some say Satcher will need to become bolder if he hopes to broaden his reach beyond Washington to directly impact the American people.

Satcher says he's still figuring dut how to balance his ability to affect policy with the power of the bully pulpit.

"You've got to make people come together so it's not just you coming out on your own," he said. But he adds: "I hope to throw some bombs.

In his first year, Satcher has focused on traditional health issues: encouraging regular exercise, discouraging smoking. He's also brought sharp attention to the health gap between minorities and white Americans.

And he's challenged the black community to confront AIDS, telling black churches they must talk about sex when more than half of all new HIV infections are to blacks.

He's toured the country, giving more than 50 speeches in 26 states - unable to accept most of the 200 invitations he gets each

But in the one major controversy so far, on needle exchange programs, Satcher declined to speak out against a Clinton administration decision thought was wrong.

Instead, he's built on his reputation as a consensus builder.

Take the sticky issue of notifying thousands of Americans they were unknowingly infected with hepatitis C. Some officials thought it would be so difficult to find those people there was no point trying; others believed it was vital to public health.

"David brought to that debate a sense of both the moral, ethical responsibility of government, and an understanding of the practical issues," said John Eisenberg, a top Health and Human

Services Department official. Administration officials say Satcher - one of the top blacks in government - has the ear of President Clinton, who calls on him for advice on race as well as

health. "He doesn't talk before he thinks," said Chris Jennings, Clinton's top health policy adviser. "And in Washington, that's a

pretty welcome development." And supporters cannot say enough about the qualities Satcher brings to the post - from his upbringing in segregated, rural and dirt poor Alabama to his years in academia, medicine and community health.

which withheld treatment from

some pregnant women with HIV

to test the effects of a new

ning that it was an opportunity to

save lives and he didn't back

Koop, who came to use his bully

pulpit brilliantly, also laid back

after a bruising confirmation

fight. It wasn't until three years

into his term that Koop talked

about condoms and AIDS,

Satcher notes - a major step

uttered the word "AIDS.

when President Reagan had never

geon general to come out swing-

ing," agreed Sen. Bill Frist, R-

Tenn., a leader on health issues.

"I appreciate Dr. Satcher's establishing a voice," Frist said.

"And, in a steady, continuous way, he will grow that voice over

"It is unnecessary for a sur-

'He believed from the begin-

Surgeon General C. Everett

approach.

down," Shalala said.

Still, even his biggest boosters say Satcher has yet to effectively use the powerful bully pulpit that comes with the crisp uniform of the surgeon general.

Circumstances have not allowed Satcher to find his voice, says Dr. Harold Varmus, director of the National Institutes of

We haven't had the public health crisis that would allow him to step up to the plate," Varmus

The office had been vacant for more than three years when Clinton swore Satcher in a year ago. last Saturday. The outspoken Elders had been forced to resign after suggesting it might be good to talk about masturbation in schools (an alternative to sex with a partner, she reasoned). Then Dr. Henry Foster's nomination was scuttled over controversy that he'd performed abortions.

Satcher survived his confirmation battle in the Senate, despite objections that he refused to support a ban on so-called "partial birth abortions." Conservatives also condemned his support for needle exchange programs, which try to stem HIV's spread by giving drug users needles to replace possibly infected ones.

Then, barely two months after Satcher's confirmation, needle exchange emerged again: Clinton sided with political and drug advisers and opted not to give federal money to local programs.

Satcher was forced to sit beside HHS Secretary Donna Shalala as she struggled to justify the decision in terms of health. rather than politics.

Asked if he was disappointed, Satcher ducked the question.

Later, in interviews, he admitted the obvious: He was, in fact, disappointed.

Asked why he didn't speak out more forcefully, Satcher suggested it was not his place, noting that he also serves as HHS assistant secretary of health.

"If you're a member of the team and that team makes a decision, and you have had an opportunity to have a lot of input to that ... you don't make an issue out of it," he said.

Others agree he was right to take a low profile so soon after his confirmation fight.

"He's been rebuilding his prestige, which the confirmation process is always so successful in tearing down," said Richard Sorian, a senior HHS official before taking a research post at Georgetown University.

Shalala said Satcher is quite capable of standing up to harsh criticism. She points to his defense of controversial AIDS studies in Africa, which have now shown some success. Satcher's Senate critics cited the studies,

ham will-co-chair an education budget subcommittee and head the committee that nominates members to the powerful University of North Carolina Board of Gover-

Rep. Larry Womble will chair the travel and tourism committee and serve as vice chair of the committees on cultural resources and community development.

In 1991, his first term as speaker, Blue gave 11 of 65 committee chairmanships, 17 percent, to minorities; and 6 chairmanships, 9 percent, to women.

In his second term, Blue gave 11 of 52 chairmanships, 21 per-cent, to minorities and 12 chairmanships, 23 percent, to women.

Black had 17 black members and 24 women from which to choose his chairmen, Blue had 14

blacks and 20 women in 1991; and 18 blacks and 24 women in 1993.

The committee appointments should relieve any concerns about fairness, Black said Friday.

"I said all along I was going to fair and inclusive,' Black said. "I tried to be sensitive to the issues of gender, race, geographical diversity and party in my appoint



All eight Democrats who voted against him got chairmanships, although not on the House's most important committees

Rep. Howard Hunter, D-Northampton, one of those who voted against Black, said he was

not surprised by Black's attempts to diversify the House leadership.

"Over the summer, during the so-called short session, Jim told me he was looking at having a white female, a white male and an African-American co-chair appropriations," Hunter said. "I think he is very conscious of what he needs to do.

Black on Thursday appointed Reps. Ruth Easterling, D-Mecklenburg; David Redwine, D-Brunswick; and Thomas Hardaway, D-Halifax, to co-chair the Appropriations Committee, the most powerful panel in the House. Hardaway is the first black and Easterling the first woman to cochair that committee in the House.

"If I question anything, I question the experience he has surrounded himself with," Huntersaid. "I don't think there is much there, but I believe they are all

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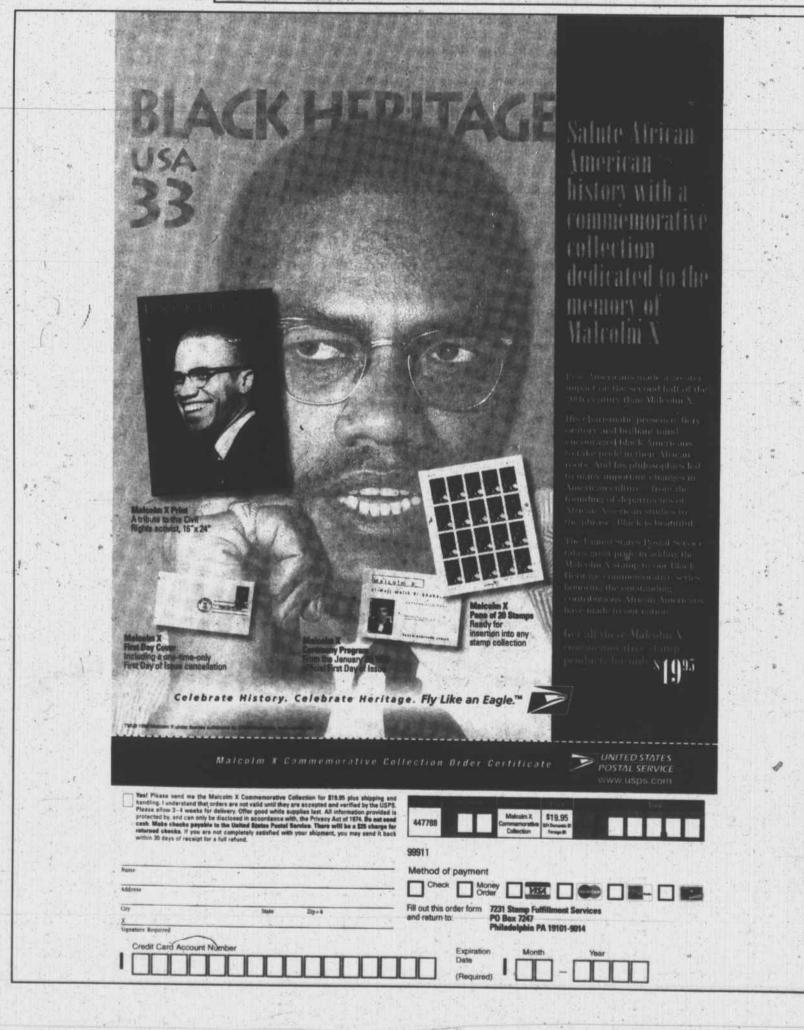
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