Koop and the AIDS Crisis

The Top Doc's Changed Image

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C. Everett Koop looks every bit the hard-line moralist, with his stern goatee and the military uniform that comes with his job as surgeon general of the United States.

When the pediatric surgeon from Philadelphia was chosen by President Reagan in 1981, his record of public campaigning to ban abortions and his allegiance to traditional "family values" made him a favorite of Moral Majority-style conservatives.

The 70-year-old Koop says his views have not changed, but the AIDS crisis—and his pragmatic, far from moralistic reaction to it—have turned his image topsy-turvy.

Many of his old conservative friends want Koop's scalp for urging AIDS education in the schools and condom advertising on television. Gays and liberals consider him a national hero for opposing mandatory AIDS tests and speaking out against discrimination toward AIDS carriers.

Obviously enjoying the difficulty people are having in pigeonholing his brand of public health, Koop recently told an interviewer, "I take that as sort of a compliment, I guess."

Koop's unique role will be illustrated dramatically tomorrow when he addresses a joint session of the California Legislature in Sacramento. His speech will be nonpartisan, but his hosts will be the Legislature's liberal Democratic leaders. They are unabashedly hoping to capitalize on Koop's prestige in the effort to pressure Republican Governor Deukmejian. They want the governor to spend more than the $21.4 million he has proposed for the year ahead to fight AIDS and to sign legislation he had vetoed that would ban discrimination against AIDS victims.

"If you regard homosexual behavior as a sin," he recently told a convention of religious broadcasters, "please remember that one of your fundamental teachings has been to 'separate the sin from the sinner.'"

Koop said recently that no one in the Reagan administration has demanded that he curb his comments, although he has lately begun to stress family values as the most important part of sex education in schools.

"The public health issues become more important to him than anything else," said one of Koop's top advisers. "He's not interested in the local politics. He is a man with a mission."

Jim Brown, Koop's aide, said Koop's seemingly liberal stand on AIDS, embodied in a report he issued last October, stems simply from his strong sense of duty.