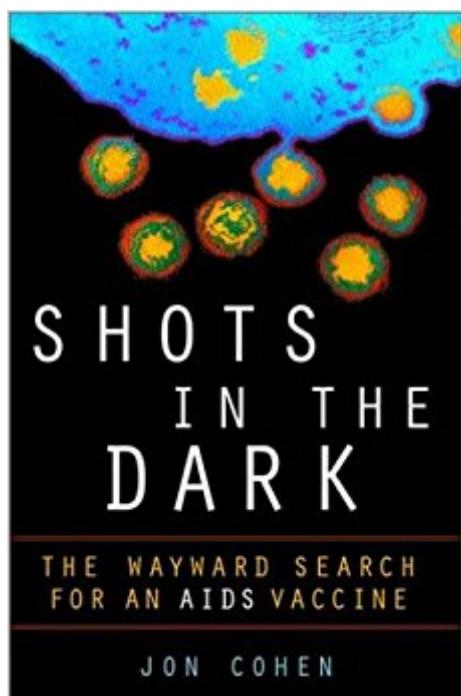


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# **Shots In The Dark: The Wayward Search For An AIDS Vaccine**



## **Synopsis**

Tells how forces inside and outside the world of science have hindered the AIDS vaccine search. Goes behind the scenes to document how promising leads go nowhere as scientists jump from one fashionable idea to the next. Also offers specific recommendations for accelerating AIDS research.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

In 1984, overzealous scientists proclaimed they would develop an AIDS vaccine in a mere two years. Now, 16 years later, researchers are still battling the bureaucracy and each other to decide which potential vaccines should be tested and who should pay for the testing. Although Cohen, a veteran science writer (who presently writes for *Talk* magazine) originally intended to document one year of the vaccine search effort, he quickly realized that "one year doesn't mean anything to AIDS vaccine researchers." Because of a lack of leadership, organization, funding and urgency, it may take a year for some scientists just to raise enough funding to subsidize their work. As Cohen notes, many of the major pharmaceutical companiesAfrightened by the liabilities and low profit margins of vaccine researchAhave pulled out, leaving scientists to vie for limited government support. Unfortunately, the researchers controlling the federal purse strings, though distinguished, often harbor conventional views about how to approach vaccine research. Therefore, innovative approaches, such as engineering or deleting viral proteins and genes, are often disregarded as either too elaborate or too risky to warrant funding. The competition for grants promotes rivalry

among scientists, a rivalry that Clinton hoped to quell when he announced his vision of a "Manhattan Project" for AIDS in 1992. Although the project never materialized, there has been a recent increase in federal funding for AIDS research that Cohen hopes will inspire the testing of promising vaccines. An insightful glimpse of a fractured but important process, this highly readable, thorough account may engage and spur AIDS activists and scientists to form a united front against a pervasive disease. 8 pages of photos not seen by PW. First serial to The Sciences; 5-city author tour. Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

While popular fear and urgency has declined since the early years of the AIDS epidemic, the success of various treatments in improving the quality and duration of the lives of AIDS patients may only have lulled the public into a false sense of security. Already there is evidence that the virus has developed resistance to certain drugs, and in many parts of the world it still rages unchecked. Ten years ago, science reporter Cohen (Science and Talk magazines) began this book intending to document the story of the discovery of an AIDS cure. Today, his story is instead a chronicle of the failure to do so, owing to a combination of bad scientific research, haphazard leadership, and obstructive political and economic agendas. The author's exhaustive sources include scientific literature, company reports, and hundreds of personal interviews. Despite this book's harsh criticisms, Cohen's purpose is not to muckrake but to issue a wakeup call. This engaging story with a vital message is recommended for all libraries. DGregg Sapp, SUNY at Albany Science Lib.  
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The book is nothing short of a fantastic account of the events which have shaped policy and prejudice of the AIDS anatomy and policy. At first the chapter all about Saul was weird. Wondering where is the author leading me, and the chapter on the companies in it for PURE profit, and not creating ANYTHING worth publishing. And of course you can't leave out the workings of a beaurocratic government (HA)! I had to drop the book after about 3/4 through it just because it started to write/read like a history book - which is why it gets four stars instead of five. As far as content and points of view (unbiased) it was GREAT and would recommend to anyone interested in POLICY of governments, companies, public view, and history of experiments shaping the AIDS vaccine (or should I say cure since there will never be a true "vaccine").

Buy this book, read it, and pass it on to a friend. In short, make it infections, as it is one of the best hopes for 'enlightened' men to capture the future. This is a massive journalistic endeavor for a single

man to mount, set against the hurdles of the decidedly clubby world of big-money medicine and ten-plus years of the Byzantine complexities of many different scientific disciplines, not one. Its factual, story-to-tell approach, is a breath of fresh air in a miasma of empty government panel reports, obtuse scientific ramblings, sensationalist hardcopy, and necessarily overstated activist rancor. For those who take time with it, it works its way, not "into your face", but slowly into your heart. For the less passionate, however, it is not clear, that this book, stoutly rendered by Cohen and W.W.Norton, carries its burden of proof, in all cases. Where are the numbers? We read that vaccine research persistently remained at 10% of the overall NAIAD budget, but, W.W., a data table would have been nice. The same with the grant evaluation-success rates and total project funding(s), and other small things here and there. But these points hardly sacrifice the whole. The broader picture and point to be made is overwhelmingly clear: Physician, help thyself! Alternatively, one might call it, "When bad things happen to really, really smart people." This realization builds from page to page with almost every conflict and with almost every story of pursuit recounted. \*\*The "endless frontier" of medicine-man-directed-science has not been expansive enough to include the basic, fundamental lessons of process science, risk bearing and decision making under uncertainty, strategic planning, and public relations.\*\* It is no accident that Jonas Salk's last recounted wish is for "better ways", and the attentive reader will find similar hints or cries for help from other scientists as well. Since 1981, it is a time for \*war\*, man against microbe. These scientists seem to miss the lessons of the \*harsh\*, \*daily\* reality that THEY AND THEIR ETHOS \*ARE\* THE EXPERIMENT! This is true, notwithstanding, of course, of the great "Nobel prize experiment", that perniciously hangs like a collaboration-distracting "mirror, mirror" amid the lab-rats. At other times, the profession also seems oddly self-aware, as the paucity of those interested in putting themselves in harm's way of such a dashing "experiment" is laid bare, for example, while the directorship for the new NIH Vaccine Center goes unwanted. Now, in 2001, the field seems blood red and who will say which fault belongs to whom? Who could fault the NIH, who, after all, have only the power to subsidize? Who could fault the politicians, who thought the scientists had it "under control (at least contained, ahem!) and adequately funded"? Who could continue to fault the system, when incremental changes have been made? Finally, what Prince will come at the end to say, "And I, for winking at your discords too, have lost a brace of kinsman?" Yet the notion that Cohen suggests, that, after twenty years, "the world is watching", does nothing but turn up the heat on a pot with the same ingredients. One cannot look into Dr. Fauci's or Dr. Baltimore's eyes, for instance, and think that these researchers, these captains, are utterly bankrupt, immoral egoists or that they have deaf ears, deaf ears to the 60 million that may die one of the most miserable deaths possible, surrender

(insofar as the human mind could even comprehend the magnitude of such a loss). To be fair - and hopeful - , the medical profession, has let itself open to study and critique, far, far more than others. Yet, more chanticleer cries will repeat the past, for what may be needed now are truly better ways, diversity of thought, competence in management, and sufficiency in funding - the hard work, not the low-hanging fruit; settling in for the long-run; in short, the next 20 years. The Buddhists believe that a single man can change the world. This reviewer hopes that others who read this book also have vigor enough to take a trumpet to Washington, not to wake anyone up, but like Joseph on the way to Jericho, truly a March of D-times.

Jon Cohen is probably the most knowledgeable journalist on the topic of HIV vaccines and has been following developments in this area for over a decade. He's had unparalleled access to people working in the field and it shows in this well organized history of the search for an HIV vaccine. I used to work in this area of research and, although there are issues where I have quibbled with the author, I can think of no better introduction to the field and the key issues that have shaped it. Cohen has been uniquely able to maintain the trust and respect of key people working in the field, while also raising important social and scientific issues. The result is a thoughtful, relatively thorough chronology that is also readable and concise. At a more personal level, the book brought back many forgotten controversies and issues that formed the background for almost a decade of my own work. The writing is that vivid, while also maintaining a high standard of scientific journalism.

Jon Cohen has written an absolutely masterful history of the search for an Aids vaccine. His book poses all the right questions. He explores all the political and scientific issues that have affected this long journey to a vaccine. His research is exhaustive and the book is well documented. It reads as the very best kind of scientific adventure tale. It is the best account that I have read about this disease and the people who have tried to unravel its mysteries.

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