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**Silence From the Great Communicator:  
The Early Years of the AIDS Epidemic Under  
the Reagan Administration**

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Silence is deafening. Silence amplifies internal anxieties, transforming a quiet hospital waiting room into a fluorescent hell. Outside the doctor's doors, the anticipation for an answer is vociferous. As a young man exits these doors, his paralyzed confusion abruptly becomes a harrowing cry. Locking eyes with the man only serves to foreshadow the answer that awaits. Inside the doctor's office, the silence intensifies. But nothing is louder than when the doctor reveals: "The test confirms you have AIDS." An AIDS diagnosis evokes the most intense emotions: heartbreak, despair, anger, confusion—living with AIDS can be demoralizing. Leaving that doctor's office also means leaving behind that former world, as an AIDS diagnosis spawns a new realm in health and perspective. This was the reality for thousands of Americans throughout the early 1980s. Emerging in 1981, there was no answer to the mystery surrounding this sudden deadly disease. It began as an obscure infection among otherwise healthy gay men. As more Americans fell ill to strange ailments and died unexpectedly, it was no longer an anomaly; this disease was the beginning of a massacre.

With fears of an unstoppable epidemic, Americans turned to President Ronald Reagan for immediate direction and aid. Dubbed the "Great Communicator" by his supporters, there was no doubt that Reagan could lead the United States to successfully combat AIDS. Yet, the Reagan administration's response was not only ineffective but also excruciatingly silent for the first five years of the epidemic. Without a substantial federal response, this obscure infection evolved into an epidemic that erased a generation of Americans in the span of half a decade.

When discussing the Reagan administration's early response to AIDS, historians tend to follow one of two positions: avoid mentioning the disease in its entirety, or blame Reagan's homophobia for the deaths of thousands of Americans. Most Reagan biographers fall into the

former argument by ignoring the epidemic and refusing to acknowledge any action toward AIDS during the first term. The word “AIDS” does not appear once within Ronald Reagan’s autobiography, *An American Life: Ronald Reagan*. On the other hand, historians focusing on LGBTQ+ and AIDS scholarship emboldened the latter by painting the administration’s initial reactions as a permanent stain on Reagan’s presidency. Randy Shilts, author of *And the Band Played On*, characterizes the Reagan administration’s response as a “drama of national failure, played against the backdrop of needless death.”<sup>1</sup> In the AIDS chapter from *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present*, historian Frank Snowden argues that “the Republican leadership under President Ronald Reagan was unenthusiastic about taking robust public health measures” because “a disease that, in Reagan’s view, affected only marginal and despised groups could make little claim to his attention.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Matthew Dean Hindman argues that due to the administration’s failure to “subdue or even publicly address the AIDS epidemic, President Reagan threatened the safety, security and livelihood of gay Americans.”<sup>3</sup> These historians denounce the early framing of AIDS as an exclusively homosexual affliction as the cause for the Reagan administration’s reluctance to promptly address the health crisis. This resistance ultimately left disadvantaged communities to suffer the fallout of this deadly disease.

Although the initial inaction demonstrated ignorance and bigotry, the Reagan administration orchestrated this calculated silence to maintain the political support of the

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<sup>1</sup> Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played on: Politics, People, and the Aids Epidemic* (Penguin Books, 1988), 26.

<sup>2</sup> Frank M. Snowden. “HIV/AIDS: The Experience of the United States,” in *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present*, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2019), 437. Accessed April 17, 2021. doi: 10.2307/j.ctvqc6gg5.25.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Dean Hindman. ““Promiscuity of the Past”: Gay Advocacy and Gay Sexuality Pre- and Post-AIDS,” in *Political Advocacy and Its Interested Citizens: Neoliberalism, Postpluralism, and LGBT Organizations*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 148. Accessed April 17, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv16t6gq3.7>.

conservative far-right. More specifically, the “Great Communicator” remained silent during the crucial years of the AIDS epidemic to avoid an ideological departure from his political party. During the first five years of the epidemic, Reagan prioritized political expediency over American public health. The Reagan administration’s delayed response to the AIDS epidemic reveals the deadly consequences of politicizing public health crises.

### **THE DISEASE**

AIDS, which stands for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, culminates after years of no treatment and a decaying immune system from the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). This virus spreads from unprotected sex, shared needles, blood transfusions, and other exposures to bodily fluids infected with HIV. The first stage of HIV occurs two to four weeks after the initial infection and includes flu-like symptoms, such as fever, chills, and a sore throat. Although signs of infection vary in severity, the virus permeates throughout the body. As infected cells circulate within the blood, HIV prompts the immune system to produce antibodies in a process known as seroconversion. The seroconversion process lasts a few months, in which remarkably high concentrations of HIV are in the blood and extremely contagious. Following the early infection stage and seroconversion period, symptoms eventually cease as the body enters the second stage of HIV. This stage is not a full recovery from the primary infection but rather an asymptomatic period that continues to hijack immune cells, replicate the virus, and potentially spread the disease to others. During this stage of HIV, a facade of health can last up to fifteen years until it

progresses to the most destructive and final stage: AIDS.<sup>4</sup> After an AIDS diagnosis, *you are on borrowed time*.

AIDS overwhelms the immune system to a point of collapse, surrendering the body to the inevitable. This final stage of HIV spends the remaining years destroying the body from opportunistic infections. People with AIDS sometimes suffer from purple, red, and brown blotches covering the face and neck, known as *Kaposi's Sarcoma*. Other symptoms range from fatigue, insomnia, depression, and extreme weight loss.<sup>5</sup> Although the progression of the disease varies individually, people with AIDS all undergo a painful end-of-life as the body deteriorates beyond any hope of recovery.

After the first detection of AIDS in 1981, the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) began national surveillance of these unusual and aggressive infections. As the CDC released reports of *Kaposi's Sarcoma* and *Pneumocystis Pneumonia* among homosexual Americans, the public used the term “gay cancer” to describe this disease. By the year's end, the CDC officially reported 337 cases and 130 deaths from this severe immune deficiency.

In 1982, the anxiety and confusion about this outbreak prompted gay activists and medical experts to form AIDS-related commissions. Community-based organizations, such as the Gay Men's Health Crisis and Kaposi's Sarcoma Research and Education Foundation, provided AIDS-related services ranging from information to counseling. During the first congressional hearing on AIDS, CDC officials revealed that tens of thousands of Americans may have had the disease. Although the CDC defined the disease as “AIDS” in 1982, many researchers opted for “GRID,” Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, to describe the disease, which

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<sup>4</sup> Avert, “Symptoms and Stages of HIV Infection.”

<sup>5</sup> Avert, “Symptoms and Stages of HIV Infection.”

deepened the public perception that AIDS only infected gay men. Throughout 1982, the increasing spread of AIDS resulted in a total death of 618 Americans.

1983 marked a year of collaboration and discovery. As the nation braced against the growing epidemic, local health departments and organizations cooperated on specialized AIDS patient care. Most notably, San Francisco's Ward 86 served as the world's first dedicated outpatient AIDS clinic and modeled standard patient care for people with AIDS. French researchers also discovered the retrovirus that causes AIDS: HIV. Through the advancements in treatment and medical findings, the enigma of the disease began to fade, and the word "AIDS" circulated in the global medical community. In 1983, there were 2,118 total American deaths from AIDS.

In 1984, AIDS infections fiercely escalated, with no signs of a decline or pause. Medical research unveiled that the transmission of AIDS was also possible through needle-sharing, which added drug abusers to the list of those at risk of contracting the disease. By the end of 1984, a total of 5,596 Americans had died from AIDS.

In 1985, AIDS became a household name, at the forefront of every American's nightmare. There was no habited region in the world free from an AIDS infection.<sup>6</sup> By the end of 1985, there were 12,529 reported American deaths.<sup>7</sup> By this time, years after its initial discovery, the American public and the federal government finally paid attention to AIDS, but it was too late. AIDS transformed into a national epidemic that flourished under the homophobia, disinterest, and defunding of the Reagan administration.

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<sup>6</sup> HIV.gov, "A Timeline of HIV and AIDS."

<sup>7</sup> amfAR, "HIV/AIDS: Snapshots of an Epidemic."

## THE DISDAIN

The Reagan presidency relied on homophobic rhetoric to attract a Christian, far-right base within the Republican party, known as the Religious Right. Leading up to the 1980s, the Religious Right influenced the Republican Party to adopt socially conservative positions, which included anti-gay beliefs. Howard Clayton explains that “the growing Religious Right meant that GOP candidates increasingly chose homophobic policies.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, many Reagan administration officials gained political support by expressing anti-gay attitudes and apathy towards people with AIDS.

Before joining the Reagan administration, White House Communications Director Pat Buchanan disparaged people with AIDS during the onset of the epidemic. Buchanan regarded the disease as moral punishment for “the poor homosexuals [who] have declared war on nature, and now nature is exacting an awful retribution.”<sup>9</sup> Although Buchanan released this statement before his confirmation to the Reagan administration, his sarcastic and hateful message resonated with many conservative voters, who continued their support after his confirmation.

Similarly, Reagan repeatedly appealed to anti-gay constituents during his 1980 presidential campaign. Reagan severed any affinity to the gay community: “[the gay movement] isn't just asking for civil rights; it's asking for recognition and acceptance of an alternative

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<sup>8</sup> Clayton Howard, “Gay and Conservative: An Early History of the Log Cabin Republicans” in *Beyond the Politics of the Closet: Gay Rights and the American State Since the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 153.

<sup>9</sup> Pat Buchanan. “Pat Buchanan’s Greatest Hits,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, February 4, 1987), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1987/02/04/pat-buchanans-greatest-hits/416e2224-f7cd-4271-8c9d-0712712df6f3/>.



lifestyle which I do not believe society can condone, nor can I.”<sup>10</sup> In addition to describing gay Americans as “abominations,” Reagan established a clear anti-gay position for his presidency. In 1984, Reagan declared that his administration would “resist the efforts of some to obtain government endorsement of homosexuality.”<sup>11</sup> Whether these statements reflected his personal beliefs or served as political hyperbole, Reagan earned the votes and support of the Religious Right. The Reagan administration could not afford to lose this political base. Therefore, a silent stance on the AIDS epidemic allowed Reagan to maintain his political support by neglecting the deadly issue facing the gay community.

While Reagan maintained his silence, his administration silenced other officials who attempted to properly address the AIDS epidemic. Since the administration prioritized political expediency, any deviation from the conservative ideology was immediately met with hostility. The Surgeon General under Reagan, Dr. C. Everett Koop, accounts his exclusion in his autobiography, *Koop: Memoirs of America's Family Doctor*:

But for an astonishing five and a half years I was completely cut off from AIDS. I was told by the assistant secretary for health, my immediate boss, that I would not be assigned to cover AIDS. The department took its cue from him. Even though the Centers for Disease Control commissioned the first AIDS task force as early as June 1981, I, as Surgeon General, was not allowed to speak about AIDS publicly until the second Reagan term. Whenever I spoke on a health issue at a press conference or on a network morning TV show, the government public affairs people told the media in advance that I would not answer questions on AIDS, and I was not to be asked any questions on the subject.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Scheer, *Playing President: up Close with Nixon, Carter, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton* (New York: Akashic, 2006), 154.

<sup>11</sup> “Campaign Notes; Reagan Would Not Ease Stand on Homosexuals,” *New York Times*, August 18, 1984, sec. 1, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> C. Everett Koop, *Koop: The Memoirs of America's Family Doctor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1992), 195.

As a Christian, Dr. Koop's appointment as Surgeon General reflected Reagan's gratitude for his conservative evangelical constituency. Although addressing national epidemics is routine for Surgeons General, the Reagan administration deliberately silenced Dr. Koop and his team of public health professionals to maintain his presence as a conservative Christian and appease Reagan voters.

According to Dr. Koop, moral biases within the Reagan administration prevented a comprehensible and practical approach to the epidemic. The Reagan presidential campaign predisposed his supporters to homophobia, which thwarted any governmental contributions toward a viable solution. Dr. Koop explains that "a large portion of the president's constituency was anti-homosexual, anti-drug abuse, anti-promiscuity, and anti-sex education," who "would not respond well to some of the things that would have to be said in a health report on AIDS."<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Dr. Koop describes the presidential advisors' apathy to an AIDS response: "AIDS was a grim and controversial subject, so [the presidential advisors] were not going to allow the President to get involved in it. As they said, "Just Say No" is a win-win; AIDS is a 'no-win'."<sup>14</sup> This homophobic ideology dictated the Reagan administration to concentrate on maintaining its constituency, which included avoiding a public health crisis that would deter political support. Although Dr. Koop's AIDS health report eventually reached the American public in 1987, his silencing reinforced the apathy towards people with AIDS. The Reagan administration's early disdain for the AIDS epidemic appeased his conservative constituency but ultimately permitted the disease to escalate beyond control.

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<sup>13</sup> Koop, *Koop: The Memoirs of America's Family Doctor*, 204.

<sup>14</sup> Koop, *Koop: The Memoirs of America's Family Doctor*, 211-212.

For the Reagan administration, the political success of the Republican party superseded the emerging threat to gay Americans. The pressure to advance political agendas restricted medical professionals from properly doing their jobs. The politicization of AIDS replaced the governmental response from battling a disease to instead battling fellow Americans, which resulted in thousands of preventable deaths.

### THE DOWNPLAY

From 1981 to 1986, the Reagan administration refused to address the epidemic voluntarily. There were only a few moments of broken silence; however, the discussions about AIDS from the Reagan administration remained brief and trivial. Within these five years, the White House Press Secretary, Larry Speakes, delivered the only public remarks about AIDS after several questions about the epidemic from a reporter. Ironically, Speakes was the only White House official to “speak” on AIDS during this period. His answers minimized the disease and reassured the public that AIDS was not a priority for the Reagan administration.

On October 15th, 1982, the reporter Lester Kinsolving questioned Secretary Speakes about the emerging epidemic:

KINSOLVING: Larry, does the President have any reaction to the announcement—the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, that AIDS is now an epidemic and over 600 cases?

SPEAKES: What’s AIDS?

KINSOLVING: Over a third of them have died. It is known as “gay plague.” (Laughter.) No, it is. I mean it’s a pretty serious thing that one in every three people that get this have died. And I wondered if the President is aware of it?

SPEAKES: I don’t have it. Do you? (Laughter.)

KINSOLVING: No, I don’t. And I am relieved...

SPEAKES: How do you know? (Laughter.)

KINSOLVING: In other words, the White House looks on this as a great joke?

SPEAKES: No, I don't know anything about it, Lester.<sup>15</sup>

The chummy jokes and eruption of laughter throughout this questioning reflected the administration's homophobic perceptions during the beginning of the epidemic. Speakes not only refrained from providing a substantial answer to Kinsolving's questions but also expressed absolute ignorance on the subject itself. Despite the CDC's official case definition of AIDS and numerous weekly reports on the epidemic, the Reagan administration demonstrated no knowledge of the disease. This showed the lack of urgency to address an epidemic that predominantly affected gay Americans. The White House's public disinterest in AIDS continued for years.

On December 11th, 1984, more than two years later, Kinsolving again questioned Speakes on the administration's reaction to new information on AIDS:

KINSOLVING: An estimated 300,000 people have been exposed to AIDS, which can be transmitted through saliva. Will the President, as Commander-in-Chief, take steps to protect Armed Forces food and medical services from AIDS patients or those who run the risk of spreading AIDS in the same manner that they forbid typhoid fever people from being involved in the health or food services?

SPEAKES: I don't know.

KINSOLVING: Could you—Is the President concerned about this subject, Larry...

KINSOLVING: No, but, I mean, is he going to do anything, Larry?

SPEAKES: Lester, I have not heard him express anything on it. Sorry.

KINSOLVING: You mean he has no—expressed no opinion about this epidemic?

SPEAKES: No, but I must confess I haven't asked him about it. (Laughter.)

KINSOLVING: Would you ask him Larry?

SPEAKES: Have you been checked [for AIDS]? (Laughter.)

KINSOLVING: I didn't hear an answer?

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<sup>15</sup> Ben Dreyfuss, "Flashback: The Reagan White House Thought AIDS Was Pretty Hilarious," *Mother Jones*, December 1, 2014, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/12/flashback-reagan-white-house-thought-aids-was-pretty-hilarious-1982/>.

SPEAKES: It's hard work. I don't get paid enough here. Is there anything else we need to do here?<sup>16</sup>

Like the previous press conferences, Speakes deflected Kinsolving's questions about AIDS. As Kinsolving pressed about President Reagan's involvement, Speakes repeatedly interrupted his questioning, undercutting the significance of the disease. Speakes revealed that Reagan had not expressed any interest in AIDS. Speakes also expressed his disinterest in asking Reagan as his Press Secretary. Speakes again asked Kinsolving if he had the disease, degrading his journalistic integrity by alluding to his potentially being gay. After dismissing Kinsolving's follow-up question to inform the President, Speakes concluded the press conference by bemoaning the "hard work" of his duties—an ironic complaint highlighting how even questions about AIDS were considered tedious and irrelevant. These homophobic remarks captured the Reagan administration's attitude toward this deadly epidemic: AIDS was not an important issue; if anything, this disease served as an amusing punchline.

Filmmaker Scott Calonico debuted a short documentary about Speakes's press conferences and characterized the Reagan administration's response as "chilling."<sup>17</sup> Calonico admits that he does not know if "it was Reagan who didn't want to make a statement or his people who thought it might damage his reputation."<sup>18</sup> The reputation in question was a presidency that openly rejected homosexuality. Therefore, any public indication of knowledge, concern, or sympathy for the AIDS epidemic would have contradicted the beliefs of the Religious Right and potentially risked losing that political base. By downplaying this epidemic,

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<sup>16</sup> Dreyfuss, "Flashback: The Reagan White House Thought AIDS Was Pretty Hilarious."

<sup>17</sup> Dreyfuss, "Flashback: The Reagan White House Thought AIDS Was Pretty Hilarious."

<sup>18</sup> Harmon Leon, "Listen to the Reagan Administration Laughing at the AIDS Epidemic," VICE, December 1, 2015, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/yvx4zy/listen-to-the-reagan-administration-laughing-at-the-aids-epidemic-511>.

Speakes echoed the homophobic rhetoric generally shared among far-right conservatives. His consistent belittlement of the disease and those infected aligned with the social conservative ideology of Reaganism. Whether Speakes was personally anti-gay or not, his homophobic banter on AIDS represented the Reagan administration's main concern to preserve its political base over addressing public health.

Without transparent and substantial answers about AIDS, the American public was not given the proper context and information about reducing the spread and protecting themselves from the disease. Instead, the Reagan administration's downplay publicly reinforced the insignificance of AIDS to the American public, which deterred domestic pressure to take serious action.

## THE DEFUNDING

A fundamental policy of the Reagan administration was the rigid economic program of "Reaganomics." With a primary objective to reduce government spending, the funding of public health service agencies was extremely limited. Under the scourge of AIDS, the severe cut in federal funding for the CDC and other health agencies became incredibly insufficient. Although the budget for AIDS-related efforts increased from \$8 million in 1982 to \$508 million in 1986, the federal funding remained insignificant to effectively combat the disease.<sup>19</sup>

The Reagan administration routinely refused to allocate additional funding towards AIDS research, prevention, and control. In the *Encyclopedia of AIDS: A Social, Political, Cultural, and*

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<sup>19</sup> "AIDS Funding for Federal Government Programs: FY1981-FY2009," EveryCRSReport.com (Congressional Research Service, April 23, 2008), <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL30731.html>.

*Scientific Record of the HIV Epidemic*, Raymond Smith details the Reagan administration's rejection of a congressional supplement to the CDC. According to Smith, the Reagan administration claimed that "the CDC did not need the money and opposed any congressional supplemental appropriations designed to fund the federal government AIDS policy efforts."<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Randy Shilts notes the Reagan administration's reluctance to grant appropriate funding. The spending allocated to public health agencies was "woefully inadequate," yet, "the Reagan administration put forward no new initiatives for AIDS funding."<sup>21</sup> There was no political motivation for the Reagan administration to increase AIDS-related funding.

After several years of insufficient funding, the United States Congress held a hearing in 1987 on the federal response to AIDS. The opening statement depicts the Reagan administration's efforts "to have been, at best, slow and inadequate."<sup>22</sup> After testimony from various doctors and researchers on the frontlines of the epidemic, the congressional committee concluded: "The Federal administration has been very reluctant to recognize the true dimensions of and propose an adequately funded federal response to AIDS."<sup>23</sup> The defunding of public health service agencies ill-prepared the United States for the AIDS epidemic, while the underfunding deprived health agencies of valuable resources to research the disease and potentially prevent AIDS from reaching an epidemic level. Although a suitable budget for AIDS-related efforts was attainable, the Reagan administration remained committed to reducing

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<sup>20</sup> Raymond A. Smith, *Encyclopedia of AIDS: A Social, Political, Cultural, and Scientific Record of the HIV Epidemic* (London: Penguin, 2002), 396.

<sup>21</sup> Shilts, 328-329.

<sup>22</sup> "The Federal Response to the AIDS Epidemic, Information and Public Education: Hearing Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations, House of Representatives, One Hundredth Congress, First Session, March 16, 1987," 2, Google Play (Google), accessed April 10, 2021, [https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=\\_jRxU\\_KauW8C&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA128](https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=_jRxU_KauW8C&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA128).

<sup>23</sup> "The Federal Response to the AIDS Epidemic, Information and Public Education: Hearing Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations, House of Representatives, One Hundredth Congress, First Session, March 16, 1987," 110.

domestic spending to fulfill the promises of Reaganomics. Limited federal funding was a popular policy among conservative voters. The Reagan administration would not risk its political base for a disease that affected Americans they morally detested.

## THE DISCLOSURE

On July 25, 1985, a publicist for Rock Hudson revealed Hudson was suffering from AIDS. As a beloved Hollywood actor, Hudson personified American masculinity. Thus, his startling announcement of an AIDS diagnosis electrified the entire country. Rock Hudson marked a turning point in the AIDS epidemic: AIDS was no longer a distant issue exclusively for gay Americans and drug abusers. Americans now held a legitimate concern of the epidemic's threat to national public health. Most strikingly, Hudson's AIDS diagnosis presented the first inklings of awareness for his close friend, President Ronald Reagan. According to Reagan's son, "the whole picture changed" for the president following Hudson's diagnosis.<sup>24</sup> The suffering of a friend and the growing consciousness of a national epidemic encouraged Reagan to finally consider action against AIDS. Nearly three months following this disclosure, Hudson died. So did Reagan's silence.

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<sup>24</sup> Karen Tumulty, "Nancy Reagan's Real Role in the AIDS Crisis," *The Atlantic* (April 12, 2021), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/04/full-story-nancy-reagan-and-aids-crisis/618552/>.



## THE DECEPTION

After Hudson's death, the Reagan administration faced domestic pressure to contain a public health crisis. Although the long-held silence had to be broken, the Reagan administration defined the epidemic as a financial triumph and moral issue to continue appeasing their conservative base.

In September of 1987, more than four years after the first reported case, Reagan mentioned AIDS publicly for the very first time in a press conference. Claiming AIDS has been a "top priority" since 1981, Reagan praised the administration's "vital contributions" while adhering to "budgetary restraints."<sup>25</sup> By framing the federal response as a success accomplished under Reaganomics, Reagan adhered to his constituency's conservatism without legitimizing homosexuality. To avoid a fallout from the Religious Right, the president's comments on AIDS remained limited. It would be another two years before Reagan delivered a major speech on the epidemic.

In 1987, Reagan addressed the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, the United States' oldest medical academy, to favor moral education as the best solution against AIDS. Reagan considered the federal government's role to avoid "value neutral" information because, to Reagan, "when it comes to preventing AIDS, don't medicine and morality teach the same lessons?"<sup>26</sup> As the Surgeon General, Dr. Koop expressed frustration with the Reagan administration's commitment to a moral crusade as its AIDS response. Koop explained that

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<sup>25</sup> Phillip Boffey "Reagan Defends Financing for AIDS," *New York Times*, September 18, 1985, sec. B, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> George E. Curry "REAGAN SAYS AIDS SOLUTION RESTS WITH MORALS," *chicagotribune.com*, September 4, 2018, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1987-04-02-8701250240-story.html>.

Reagan “reasoned anecdotally instead of examining the evidence and drawing conclusions.”<sup>27</sup> To the Reagan administration, the AIDS epidemic emerged because Americans had “abandoned traditional morality, and it would not get out of the situation until we returned to that morality.”<sup>28</sup>

The Reagan administration displaced national anxieties about AIDS to instead blame homosexuality in accordance with Christian heteronormativity. By approaching AIDS as a moral issue, the Reagan administration remained aligned with its conservative base while addressing the epidemic. This strategy did not effectively reduce the spread of AIDS or lessen the strain on public health agencies, but it maintained the political expediency that Reagan prioritized.

The second major AIDS speech Reagan delivered was at a dinner honoring the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR) in 1987. Reagan introduced his address with a joke:

A man had just been elected chairman of his community's annual charity drive. And he went over all the records, and he noticed something about one individual in town, a very wealthy man. And so, he paid a call on him, introduced himself as to what he was doing, and he said, “Our records show that you have never contributed anything to our charity.” And the man said, “Well, do your records show that I also have a brother who, as the result of a disabling accident, is permanently disabled and cannot provide for himself? Do your records show that I have an invalid mother and a widowed sister with several small children and no father to support them?” And the chairman, a little abashed and embarrassed, said, “Well, no, our records don't show that.” The man said, “Well, I don't give anything to them. Why should I give something to you?”<sup>29</sup>

The crowd at the dinner reacted with laughter. Reagan then began to praise the many contributions to the fight against AIDS. Although this joke served as a humorous way to warm up an audience, it reflects the overall federal response to AIDS. Described as a “fable” by Shilts,

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<sup>27</sup> Koop, *Koop: The Memoirs of America's Family Doctor*, 221 and 224.

<sup>28</sup> Koop, *Koop: The Memoirs of America's Family Doctor* 224.. /

<sup>29</sup> “Documents - President Reagan's AmfAR Speech | The Age of Aids | FRONTLINE,” PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), accessed April 8, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/aids/docs/amfar.html>.

Reagan's joke reveals the unimportance of AIDS to the administration.<sup>30</sup> If Reaganomics promised and enacted reductions in federal spending for essential government agencies, then why would the administration allocate sufficient spending to fight a disease that only disadvantaged gay Americans and drug abusers?

The Reagan administration consistently sided with their conservative ideology when discussing AIDS, allowing politics to drive their solutions against the epidemic. By upholding the conservative moral standard as a more important and effective approach, the Reagan administration only accomplished its political goals, which would not attack the health crisis at its roots.

### THE DEFENSE

The Reagan administration received numerous criticisms for mishandling the AIDS outbreak and early epidemic. Therefore, Reagan historians avoid acknowledging the epidemic to present his presidency in a positive light. Jennifer Brier is one of the few Reagan biographers to mention AIDS and to dedicate an entire chapter on the administration's response in *A Companion to Ronald Reagan*. Brier does not shy away from briefly judging the federal response; however, she concentrates on the benefits of the administration's silence:

...AIDS did more to politically rally progressives than conservatives at the end of the twentieth century and in the process became a central pillar in the political opposition to Reagan. In this respect his silence made it easier to hear all the protest chants.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Koop, *Koop: The Memoirs of America's Family Doctor*; 596.

<sup>31</sup> Jennifer, Brier, "Reagan and AIDS," -In *A Companion to Ronald Reagan*, 222, A.L. Johns (Ed.). <https://doi-org.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/10.1002/9781118607770.ch13>.

Although the federal inaction on AIDS brought several communities together and strengthened the liberal opposition against Reagan, it was at the expense of thousands of American lives for several years. Brier's attempt to redeem the Reagan administration fails to acknowledge the needless deaths caused by inaction. Furthermore, progressive political opposition is not effective when an epidemic is slaughtering its members.

Despite the initial stigmatization, the AIDS epidemic did not exclusively target gay communities. The politicization of the AIDS epidemic only served to benefit the Reagan administration, a strategic silence that endangered the entire nation.

### **THE DANGERS**

During the first five years of the AIDS epidemic, historians can observe a story of extermination and expediency. When the United States could combat this disease, the federal government abandoned its citizens. The silence from the Reagan administration represented the Christian conservative base; Reagan embodied this political base's lack of sympathy and abundance of homophobia. By demonizing homosexuality and dismissing the disease, the Reagan administration's deliberate silence secured the support of the Religious Right and other homophobic voters. Reagan understood how to communicate with his conservative constituency, even if nothing was said at all.

However, the silence from the Great Communicator did not come without consequences. The federal government's inaction resulted in thousands of American deaths, slowly and painfully deteriorating from an incurable, lifelong disease. By the end of Reagan's first term in

1985, there were over 12,000 American deaths from AIDS. Yet, this tide of death that swept through the United States was only the first wave. By 1990, there were 120,453 reported deaths, nearly ten times more than in 1985. In 2000, the total death count jumped to 448,060.<sup>32</sup> By 2019, AIDS had claimed the lives of 675,000 Americans.<sup>33</sup> Many of these deaths were preventable, but due to the Reagan administration's politicization, the United States failed to initially implement a productive strategy on a seemingly nonpartisan health issue.

The dangers of politicizing the AIDS epidemic resulted in needless American deaths and a false sense of security; AIDS threatened every American, regardless of sexual orientation or political preference. By stigmatizing a community of Americans based on their sexuality during a calamity, the attempts to deliver a vaccine or cure become complicated and sluggish. This politicization pushed Americans to indulge in homophobic speech and apathy, discouraging efforts to properly address the epidemic. Americans died while the administration adopted homophobic rhetoric, overlooked medical findings, downplayed the significance of the disease, and denied sufficient funding. Tens of thousands of American deaths were expendable for the administration's political goals. Amidst this egregious institutional indifference, one cannot help but ask: *would they have waited until all that was left was complete silence?*

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<sup>32</sup> AmfAR, "HIV/AIDS: Snapshots of an Epidemic."

<sup>33</sup> CDC, "CDC Fact Sheet | Today's HIV/AIDS Epidemic"

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