

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION ARTS & SCIENCES

“LOOK PRETTY AND DO AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE”: AN ANALYSIS OF THE REAGAN  
ADMINISTRATION’S RESPONSE TO THE AIDS CRISIS

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SPRING 2018

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for baccalaureate degrees  
in COMMUNICATION ARTS & SCIENCES  
and TELECOMMUNICATIONS  
with honors in Communication Arts & Sciences

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how the Reagan Administration handled the AIDS crisis during the epidemic's formative years between 1981 and 1985. It seeks to prove how a previously unknown disease that killed over 20,000 Americans in less than five years was allowed to go unaddressed by the president for so long and why this indifference was detrimental to the fight against AIDS. By identifying the communicative failures and external circumstances that led to a perfect storm of systemic political apathy, we can recognize past mistakes in order to ensure that they never have to happen again.

I aim to examine the Reagan Administration's relationship with the AIDS crisis in three parts. First, I look at the political and social environment at the beginning of the decade that allowed Ronald Reagan to be elected into office. I specifically look at the rise of the neoconservative movement called the New Right and how it came to place itself in a position of power even before Reagan became president. Ultimately, the religious fundamentalist views of this new political faction would develop the narrative that AIDS was God's retribution against the gay community and intravenous drug users, who were the first to be affected by the disease.

Second, key members of the Reagan Administration and their efforts to avoid, and even suppress, the issue at all costs provide evidence that the willful ignorance of the federal government was at least somewhat to blame for the relentless spread of the disease. Press conferences, congressional hearings, and communications with the Centers for Disease Control are used to support the claim that the Reagan Administration went out of its way to avoid addressing the AIDS epidemic while thousands perished.

Finally, I examine the impact of grassroots activist organizations that, by the mid-1980s, had gained enough support to lead massive demonstrations and protests that may have done more to help the AIDS crisis than the government had in nearly half a decade. This section shows the perseverance of those who had essentially been abandoned by the government that was sworn to protect them and how the media became an effective tool in gaining the attention that the cause so desperately needed.

Overall, this thesis aims to present the egregious circumstances that allowed one of the largest epidemics in American history to go unchecked for so long. The failure of the Reagan Administration to properly convey the severity of the epidemic to the American people indicates just how important communication within power relationships is. It explores how shortsighted prejudices such as homophobia, especially when held by those in power, can have disastrous effects that can impact the entire world. Although the AIDS epidemic is often glossed over in history books, it deserves to be recognized for its faults because the elements that led to this national health crisis are still very much a threat today.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am so fortunate to have been surrounded by such amazing people while I worked on this project. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart for your endless love and support. Without you this would not have been possible.

First, I want to thank my thesis supervisor, Dr. Stephen Browne for his patience, encouragement, and guidance throughout this process. Your work on public memory is part of the reason I began thinking about this topic in the first place, and the knowledge and direction that you brought to this project has been invaluable over the past few months.

To my honors adviser, Lori Bedell. You were my first professor on my first day of class freshman year, and I could not be happier to both begin and end this journey with you. Thank you for your compassion and counsel over the years, along with everything else you have done to make my college career so special.

To my family, especially my dad, Frank Kavanagh, without whom none of this would be possible. Thank you for your unconditional love and support. I am endlessly grateful to you and Mary Kate for always being there, and I cannot convey how much I appreciate everything you do for me.

To Maris Hayes, Stephanie Mock, and Rachel Tiscione, my friends that have truly seen me through this tumultuous year. I could not imagine this process without you by my side and there is no one else I would want to finish out my college experience with.

Finally, to all those who have died and those who are still living with HIV/AIDS around the world. Your perseverance and determination in combating this disease continues to be inspiring.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

When most people think of the 1980s in the United States they think of a reinvigorated economy, video games, the Cold War, John Hughes movies, the Iran-Contra affair, pop music, and of course, Ronald Reagan's presidency. However, for certain groups of people this decade is overshadowed by a disease that claimed over 83,000 lives in less than ten years. The AIDS epidemic began in the United States as a fast-spreading, unknown illness that baffled the medical community in 1981, but did not receive significant attention until many years later. There are many reasons for this failure of communication, such as social stigmas, the rise of neoconservative views, and bureaucratic interference in the healthcare field, all of which will be examined in this thesis.

By taking a deeper look at the AIDS epidemic one can see just how much power politics and social beliefs can have on aspects of life thought to be independent of such influences. Science and medicine are areas generally believed to be unbiased and free of opinion, leaving only facts. This impartiality is one of the foundational reasons that our society puts so much value on these fields of study. Science is not like politics: it is not subject to change every four years and is not flexible to accommodate the views of others. It exists in pursuit of universal truths that can help us understand our world and ultimately create a better society for it. However, upon further examination, it becomes apparent that science is not altogether independent of outside influences and is subject to the beliefs and views of the society in which it exists.

The AIDS crisis is an example of what can happen when the independent nature of science and medicine is compromised by political agendas. The fact that a highly contagious, lethal disease was able to spread at an alarming rate through several major American cities decimating populations with little attention from the federal government is nothing short of shocking despite the fact that it happened less than 35 years ago. The failure of the president of the United States, one nicknamed “the Great Communicator” no less, to publicly address a national health crisis before it had claimed the lives of more than 12,000 Americans represents an egregious oversight and yet it is glossed over in many history books. This, in addition to the systematic prevention of funding for the healthcare field as it desperately tried to help people who were dying from an unknown disease over several years, should serve as a cautionary tale for the American people and future leaders.

How was this allowed to happen in a country that is supposed to be a role model for the rest of the world? The answer ultimately lies in the type of people who were the initial victims of the disease and the attitude of those in power toward those people. Gay men and intravenous drug users, two groups of people designated pariahs of society, were the first to be affected by AIDS. Those in power at the time were supported by the New Right movement, whose fundamental values vilified those who did not fall in line with their idea of traditional conservatism. The Reagan Administration was never going to aid a group whose lifestyle it had just won an election condemning, let alone allocate funding to help these people after promising to reduce government spending.

It should be terrifying to think that the values of the dominant political party can decide whether you live or die in the United States, especially when it is a matter of science and medicine that should by all means be independent of political interests. This thesis seeks to

identify and examine these contributing factors that led to a perfect storm of political and social ignorance during the most crucial time of what would become a worldwide pandemic. This is not the first time that science and politics have become entangled, and it likely will not be the last, but in examining and recognizing past mistakes we can learn from them and pursue a better future.

### **Contextualizing HIV/AIDS in the United States**

This thesis relies heavily on understanding how the AIDS epidemic progressed in context with the political and social environment in the United States at the time. Ronald Reagan won the presidential election over incumbent Jimmy Carter in 1980 after appealing to many Americans who were frustrated and distrustful of big government. In his campaign he vowed to reduce government spending and federal programs, which would become a problem when government agencies like the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) lobbied for research funding while trying to combat the AIDS crisis. Additionally, some of Reagan's biggest supporters came from a neoconservative political faction called the New Right. This group emerged out of a desire to return to religious fundamentalism following the progressive movements in the 1960s and 1970s. After Reagan won the presidency, this group suddenly had significant political clout that they used for their own agenda-setting purposes, which often involved opposing progressive movements such as gay rights.

This influence, coupled with the fact that homophobia was still rampant in the United States at this time, led to a general desire to avoid the topic both in the government and the media. AIDS could not be mentioned without also addressing the gay community, which many

had spent a lifetime ignoring or actively condemning. Even within the gay community it was difficult to find people who would lend their support because so many were still closeted and saw addressing the issue in any way as aligning with homosexuality in general. This would prove to be a disadvantage to the AIDS movement when grassroots organizations began to mobilize in the mid-1980s.

Overall, this thesis aims to show how the communication, or lack thereof, between healthcare professionals, the media, and the Reagan Administration allowed AIDS to run rampant throughout the country unchecked. The avoidant, dismissive approach that key figures in the president's administration used for years when confronted about the AIDS crisis was a result of both preconceived and politically motivated prejudices. Consequently, thousands of Americans spent the first few years of the crisis confused and helpless in the face of a deadly epidemic that the government refused to acknowledge.

## **Methodology**

This thesis aims to reveal how the Reagan Administration was able to suppress public knowledge and professional medical advances that could have helped combat the AIDS epidemic more effectively. Since most of the evidence lies in the deliberate inaction that surrounded the issue, most of this paper will present the interests of the Reagan Administration and explore how these interests resulted in a desire to avoid the AIDS epidemic at all costs, which had disastrous effects in the fight against the disease. I use quotes from White House officials who worked for the Reagan Administration to exemplify the dismissive nature with which the crisis was initially handled. Testimonies from congressional hearings are analyzed in comparison with the actual

actions taken by the federal government. Additionally, I use the media to examine the rhetoric that was used in discussing the AIDS crisis, compare the urgency behind the AIDS issue to other news stories at the time, and draw important takes from editorials written by prominent figures in the AIDS movement and the government.

### **Chapter Preview**

The following chapters are divided into three major sections that form a timeline of the government's response to the AIDS crisis through the lens of different stakeholders during the first part of the 1980s. The first chapter explores the political and social climate of the United States at the beginning of the decade. It describes the conditions that led to the emergence of the New Right, which was formed in response to the progressive social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The ideology of the New Right was founded in conservative policy making and religious fundamentalism, which included the rejection of progressive movements for racial equality, feminism, and most importantly, gay rights. The New Right's staunch opposition to the gay community gained widespread attention through the increasing popularity of radio and television channels dedicated to broadcasting evangelical Christian messages. This phenomenon called "televangelism" often blamed homosexuality for the evil that they believed plagued the nation and spouted extreme rhetoric that likened homosexuality to pedophilia and called for "cutting [homosexuals'] throats" (Banwart). These ideas about the gay community were circulating in the American public sphere before the AIDS epidemic even began and surely contributed to the widely shared opinion that AIDS victims were experiencing God's retribution for their sins. The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the views of the dominant political faction toward those

most affected by AIDS even before the crisis began, and how the communication tactics the group employed allowed them to appeal to many Americans. Reagan was elected president in large part because of the support of the New Right and their ability to effectively communicate their ideology to the American people. He certainly did not want to lose that support once in office, especially since he planned to run for a second term. For this reason, it is important to evaluate Reagan's response to the AIDS crisis in the context of who he was representing and why he would value their interests.

In the second chapter, I will examine specific actions within the Reagan Administration that point to a conscious decision to avoid addressing or supporting the fight against AIDS in any way during the first few years of the epidemic. I analyze the relationship between the media and the Reagan Administration, specifically recordings of White House press conferences that detail how Press Secretary Larry Speakes deflected and mocked the issue of the AIDS epidemic for years. Also examined are the congressional hearings regarding the fight for federal aid that resulted in Congress taking matters into its own hands and increasing federal budgets for AIDS research that the executive branch strongly opposed. The testimonies of gay rights activists and members of the president's cabinet indicate a dissonance between the efforts of grassroots organizations and the federal government. Finally, this chapter looks at more recent interviews of CDC officials and others who were at the forefront of the fight against AIDS. They discuss the extent of the Reagan Administration's interference and how they believe things may have turned out if the federal government had been more supportive and communicated the severity of the AIDS epidemic more effectively to the American people.

In the third chapter, I look at the rise of grassroots activism that took place toward the end of Reagan's first term and into his second. I first contextualize what it meant to be gay in during

this tumultuous time and how the stigma surrounding the gay community was a huge obstacle in trying to recruit people for activist movements. Even more broadly, the AIDS issue became synonymous with a gay issue, which prevented many people from associating themselves with a public health concern that they might have otherwise supported. I ultimately come to the conclusion that the efforts of the gay community were some of the most important in eventually getting the necessary recognition from the federal government. Some notable activist groups included ACT UP, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and the Gay Men's Health Crisis, who led the charge in shifting activist efforts away from the federal government and toward the media. Although they may have been slow to mobilize, when protests and demonstrations started to form they escalated quickly, the most well known resulting in to a forced shut down of the FDA in New York. I examine the contrast of the aggressive communication style of the activist organizations with the passive, avoidant approach of the federal government. In the end, the most successful demonstrations were often the most disruptive because of the media attention they gained.

Overall, this thesis examines the AIDS epidemic through the lens of three different stakeholders in order to demonstrate how the Reagan Administration was negligent in their handling of a crisis. By recognizing the different elements and environments that came together to allow this disaster to happen, we can learn from past mistakes. However, it is crucial that we take the time to accept the fact that the United States' early response to the AIDS crisis was a communicative failure due to political agendas born out of deep social prejudices, and thousands of people lost their lives as a result.

## Chapter 2

### 1980: Shifting Political Climate – Reagan and the New Right Alliance

Ronald Reagan's decisive victory over Jimmy Carter in the 1980 presidential election marked a turning point in American political and cultural ideology. This campaign and subsequent victory set the stage for Reagan's loyalty to the New Right, which would have a significant influence on his presidency during the AIDS crisis. Reagan positioned himself perfectly in the cross-section between religious fundamentalists and neo-conservatives by 1980, both of which gained traction in response to the people's distrust and dissatisfaction with big, liberal federal government. In aligning himself with this new faction, Reagan would be forced to appease such a powerful segment of the Republican party's voting bloc, a demographic that made lobbying against gay rights one of the cornerstones of its agenda. This would prove to be a conflict of interest for the Reagan Administration during the AIDS crisis, when circumstances would force the president to confront an issue he had ran a campaign on avoiding.

A perfect storm of economic inequality, extension of New Deal social programs, and an increasingly liberal American culture in a post-World War II society paved the way for what is now considered modern conservatism in the United States. A significant portion of this growing political faction was comprised of white Christians that were mostly concentrated in the Sun Belt region of the country, but had a presence all over the United States. When this group delivered Reagan a crucial part of the voter base in 1980, they made it clear that they wanted something in return. This new coalition used its power to essentially elect a candidate to office with the objective of having some say in the legislative agenda of the administration, which in this case included overturning *Roe v. Wade*, reinstating school prayer, defeating the Equal Rights

Amendment, and disallowing gay rights. By having some influence over the most powerful office in the country, the New Right could promote their agenda, or at the very least detract from issues they did not agree with.

### **Section 1: The Rise of Social Conservatism in the United States**

The new wave conservatism that arose in the later part of the twentieth century was a combination of two major factors. This included public disdain for big federal government in the wake of political scandals and economic hardship as well as a return to Christian fundamentalism in response to the cultural revolution that took place in the 1960s and 1970s. In order to understand the influences of conservatism on the Reagan presidency and how it affected the AIDS crisis, it is important to know how and why it originated and recognize the basic principles on which this modern ideology was founded.

The 1960s and 1970s were a restless time in American history. The protests and general anarchy in response to the Vietnam War sharply contrasted the patriotic and dutiful sentiment that was widely shared during the Second World War. People were suddenly distrustful of the government and angry over its exertion of power. Political scandals such as Watergate and President Ford's unpopular pardon of Richard Nixon did not help the government's cause and Americans began to seriously question the moral character of the leaders of their country. Additionally, the weakness of the American economy in the 1970s left many feeling resentful toward the federal government's choices. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, itself an extension of New Deal and federal programs, was seen as wasteful during a time of great conflict in the United States. In his book about the 1980 presidential election, author Jeffrey D. Howison

alleges that the stagflation of the United States' economy led to white men being exposed to people they were not in the 1940s and 1950s. Working alongside women, African-Americans, and gay people created conflict and resentment that had not been as prominent during periods of prosperity where white men were not forced to compete for jobs with minorities that were often thought of as second class citizens (Howison). This resentment and deviation from the status quo would come to form one of the main principles of new social conservatism: traditional family values.

The 1970s also saw a resurgence of Christian fundamentalism, a religious movement that was able to reach more people than ever before due to the increased accessibility of media, specifically television and radio broadcasting. The 1960s and 1970s were inundated with social movements and cultural revolutions such as the Civil Rights Movement, second wave feminism, gay rights, and sexual liberation among others. The Equal Rights Amendment, Roe v. Wade, sex pervading culture, divorce, and crime led to pushback from some groups who blamed the liberal government that had also landed the country in economic hard times. There were many people who saw these cultural trends as the moral decline of the country and formed a coalition seeking to restore America back to a God-fearing nation.

Christian fundamentalism emerged as a response to the cultural revolution in the United States. This movement advocated for the reinstatement of God in the government, return to traditional family values, and the restriction of rights for women, gays, and African-Americans among other things. Prominent leaders such as Reverend Jerry Falwell, who would go on to have a large role in President Reagan's election and presidency soon came to the scene. Falwell was the founder of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Virginia who essentially summarized the conservative Christian fundamentalist movement by preaching, "We are fighting a holy war.

What's happened to America is that the wicked are bearing rule. We have to lead the nation back to the moral stance that made America great ....we need to wield influence on those who govern us" (Banwart).

The movement was able to gain support through its use of radio and television broadcasting, a phenomenon called "televangelism" for its use of public broadcasting and evangelical Christian messages. Leaders of the movement often had their own shows where they would preach fundamentalist ideals and point out everything they believed was wrong with big government, which were incredibly popular. These shows were usually very impassioned on issues that were a threat to Christian fundamentalism as evidenced when Falwell said, "Though they claim to be another poorly treated minority, homosexuals are involved in open immorality as they practice perversion. They are not a minority any more than murderers, rapists, or other sinners are a minority. Since they cannot reproduce, they proselyte." Although conservative Christian fundamentalists advocated against rights for women and African-Americans, they were extremely vehement in their disapproval of gay lifestyles often dedicating entire segments about "homosexuality bring[ing] about the demise of American culture as we know it" (Shilts). Scholar Doug Banwart claims that "the portrayal of homosexuals as pedophiles allowed the Christian right to link gay rights with abortion and feminism as yet another example of the government's attack on the family" (Banwart). By the end of the 1970s, Jerry Falwell's show was on 373 stations, more than Johnny Carson at the time.

Armed with a loyal following, Falwell formed the Moral Majority in 1979, a political action committee with the objective of promoting a conservative religious agenda in government (Shilts). The Moral Majority gained significant political clout and even before the election of

1980 it was apparent that the New Right mostly made up of conservative Christians would have a great influence.

### **Section 2: The New Right Backs Reagan for the 1980 Election**

By the time Jimmy Carter's first term came to an end, many Americans were eager for a change of some kind. Carter ran on the notion that he was a man of the people, but his centrism would make the United States look weak and leave people frustrated and disappointed. Former Governor of California, Ronald Reagan had been staying relevant by delivering radio commentaries aligned with the development of American conservatism in which he criticized the federal "expulsion" of God from public schools and promoted other ideas that were in line with the New Right (Howison).

Despite the fact that President Carter was a self-described born-again Christian, he had not done much to forward the Christian fundamentalist agenda, which is why the Moral Majority chose to support Ronald Reagan early on. Reagan himself was a Christian although not as dedicated to the Christian fundamentalist cause as religious groups would have preferred. However, Reagan wasted no time in garnering their wholehearted support. After receiving the Republican nomination, Reagan opened his acceptance speech with, "Can we begin our crusade joined together in a moment of silent prayer?" (Scher). He also ran his campaign on other conservative principles that seemed to please many, religious and non-religious alike. Besides the his proposed social policy, he was adamant about slashing the federal budget for government programs, which pleased many conservatives who attributed the country's economic decline to liberal government's overreach (Shilts). His dedication to reducing federal spending would prove

to be a major obstacle when it came to funding AIDS research and sticking to his campaign promises. He also traveled to Dallas for a non-partisan meeting of religious leaders during his campaign where he famously said, “I know you can’t endorse me....but I want you to know I endorse you” (Balz). It seemed the Christian right finally had someone in a position of political power who would look out for them and keep their best interests at heart.

Once they had found their candidate, the religious right did not falter in using all the potential they had. The Moral Majority donated graciously to Reagan’s campaign as well as the campaigns of other Congressional candidates that had been assessed and approved based on morality by an evangelical Christian board. They used tactics that were previously employed by unions and civil rights organizations such as local meetings, telephone banks, and transportation to the polls (Banwart). In the end, Reagan won in a landslide election, winning 489 electoral votes and 44 states. Falwell’s Moral Majority was credited with giving Reagan two-thirds of the white evangelical vote. Conservative Christian groups had become for Republicans what unions were for Democrats. Reports show that Reagan had successfully tapped into factions that had been loyal to Democrats as well such as union members and southern whites. Republicans also gained control of the Senate for the first time in 25 years (Howison). The election of 1980 showed the extent of the power held by right-wing Christians that would prove to carry over into the next four years.

### **Section 3: The Influence of the Moral Majority During Reagan's First Term**

Now that their candidate had been elected to office, the next step for the conservative Christian movement was to push their agenda and put even more allies in powerful positions in order to enact real change. James Robison, a television evangelist from Texas implored President Reagan to fill his cabinet with “Godly men” and implied that if he did not he would be “confined to the ranks of mediocrity” (Banwart). Reagan did end up appointing people in line with the neo-conservative way of thinking. James Watt, an extremely socially conservative bureaucrat was appointed Secretary of the Interior, Christian evangelical educator Robert Billings was given a prominent position in the Department of Education, and anti-abortion doctor C. Everett Koop was given the title of Surgeon General. In the later years, Reagan would come to regret his decision in hiring Koop when the Surgeon General would spend the better part of his first term calling for attention to be given to the AIDS crisis, requests that would be denied (The C. Everett Koop Papers).

Reagan never forgot those he owed for the position he was in. He reinforced their union by attending the joint meetings of the National Association of Evangelicals and National Religious Broadcasters for three out of the four years of his first term. In the first few years of his presidency, items in Reagan's social agenda such as a federal ban on abortions and legalization of organized prayer in schools were pushed on Capitol Hill as promised (Banwart). Throughout his presidential term, the ideologies and rhetoric of the New Right would bleed into Reagan's political agenda.

At the same time, Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority were remaining in the public eye. Television broadcasts consistently showed where the Christian right stood on homosexuality, especially when HIV/AIDS entered the public sphere. Reverend Walter Alexander of Reno's

First Baptist Church is quoted as saying, “I think we should do what the Bible says and cut their [homosexuals’] throats” (Shilts). The nationally distributed *Moral Majority Report* explored every unsavory aspect of gay life and typically concluded by alleging that Americans could fight the spread of AIDS by giving him money.

Although President Reagan was doing much for his political allies to whom he owed his election, it was the things his administration was not doing that would prove to be detrimental. In 1982 and 1983, around the time that AIDS was becoming a national epidemic, Congress was constantly hitting walls in allocating money for the Centers for Disease Control. Budgets would be drawn up, submitted, approved, and then reduced. “Between June 1981 and May 1982 the CDC spent less than \$1 million on AIDS and \$9 million on Legionnaire’s Disease. At that point more than 1,000 of the 2,000 reported AIDS cases resulted in death; there were fewer than 50 deaths from Legionnaire’s Disease” (Bronski). This drastic lack of funding would continue throughout the Reagan years. In December 1983, a Congressional committee released a report documenting the Administration’s inadequate response to AIDS,

Tragically, funding levels for AIDS investigations have been dictated by political considerations rather than by the professional judgments of scientists and public health officials who are waging the battle against the epidemic. The inadequacy of funding, coupled with inexcusable delays in research activity, leads me to question the federal government’s preparedness for national health emergencies, as well as this administration’s commitment to an urgent resolution to the AIDS crisis. (Shilts)

It seemed the reasons behind the Reagan Administration’s indifference about the AIDS epidemic were somewhat transparent to public officials who advocated for attention to AIDS. One of the biggest supporters of AIDS research and funding, Congressman Henry Waxman, who

sat on the House Subcommittee on Health and the Environment, wrote an op-ed in the Washington Post in 1985 in which he stated, “It is surprising that the president could remain silent as 6,000 Americans died, that he could fail to acknowledge the epidemic’s existence. Perhaps his staff felt he had to, since many of his New Right supporters have raised money by campaigning against homosexuals” (Waxman).

Reagan had won the presidency because of the support of the conservative Christian New Right, a political ideology whose basic principles were founded in homophobia and opposition to anyone who could be seen as a part of the cultural revolution that had taken place in the decades before. The New Right’s popularity in the United States during this time owed much to televangelism and accessible communication style that made their ideas appealing to many Americans. Unfortunately, their success with both the people and the federal government would come at the cost of proper attention and information for those affected by AIDS in the early 1980s. Reagan, a president still in his first term, undoubtedly understood how crucial retaining the New Right vote would be in 1984, and took measures not to agitate or give them reason to think he was anything but their ally in the White House, even if it meant remaining silent while thousands of Americans died. The following chapter explores the methods that key figures within the Reagan Administration used to avoid addressing the AIDS issue and how this avoidance impaired the progress in combating the disease.

## Chapter 3

### 1981-1984: The Reagan Administration

Ronald Reagan was inaugurated as the 40th president of the United States on January 20, 1981. Less than six months later the Centers for Disease Control would release a report describing a rare lung infection called *Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia* (PCP) in five previously healthy gay men in Los Angeles, California. This was the first report of the AIDS epidemic, which by the end of Reagan's first term in 1984 would infect 7,239 Americans and claim 5,596 lives. It would take the president three more years to publicly address AIDS in a speech where he declared the disease "public health enemy number one," a phrase that had been repeated throughout the Administration for five years with very little support behind it (President Reagan Delivers First Major Speech on AIDS Epidemic in 1987).

Nearly three decades later, Reagan is remembered as a champion of conservative values that turned the tide of the American economy and reduced the obtrusive role of government in people's lives. While this has merit, it is also important to examine the areas where these values of his administration failed certain groups of people, namely those affected by the AIDS crisis. Even Reagan's most supportive biographers concede that the president's response was "halting and ineffective" (Cannon). More commonly, historians completely gloss over AIDS altogether, which is not that surprising considering Reagan said so little about the issue during his presidency that it could be seen as inconsequential. However, his administration's actions or lack thereof did have consequences that were born out of adherence to fiscally conservative promises made on the campaign trail as well as the personal turned professional prejudices of those within

the Administration that had clear ties to the interests of the New Right addressed in the previous section. Ultimately, the Reagan Administration's prioritization of conservative domestic policies over American lives and the stigmatized perception of the gay community shared by those within the White House allowed the AIDS epidemic to unchecked for as long as it did.

### **Section 1: Beginning of the Outbreak and Gay Stigma**

Unlike the Reagan Administration, public health agencies did not waste time handling the threat of a new disease. Days after they published the first report of what would become known as AIDS in the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (MMWR), the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) received numerous reports of similar cases among gay men including a rare, aggressive form of cancer called Kaposi's Sarcoma. The CDC immediately established the Task Force on Kaposi's Sarcoma and Opportunistic Infections in order to "develop a case definition for national surveillance" (AIDS: The Early Years and CDC's Response).

Meanwhile, the *New York Times* ran one of the first stories on the subject titled "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals." Even in the earliest reports the fact that those afflicted were exclusively gay men was targeted, and with a clear emphasis on their promiscuity. In the article, Lawrence K. Altman writes, "According to Dr. Friedman-Kien, the reporting doctors said that most cases had involved homosexual men who have had multiple and frequent sexual encounters with different partners, as many as ten sexual encounters each night up to four times a week" and also stated "there was no apparent danger to nonhomosexuals from contagion" (Altman). It was after this article that the term "gay cancer" entered the public lexicon. Additional reports used somewhat homophobic language or stereotypes when trying to make sense of this newfound

disease, insinuating that certain sex practices or the increased number of “unfamiliar sex partners” within the gay community could be an explanation (Siegal and Siegal). This “other” mentality about those afflicted with the disease would continue throughout the decade in literature, policy, and public discourse, making it difficult to gain support for the cause.

Additionally, the press was generally uninterested in reporting on the subject in the first few years despite the fact that CDC officials were calling it a serious public health problem. Dr. James Curran, leader of the early AIDS task force stated that by 1982 there had been more deaths from AIDS “than have occurred with all the cases of Toxic Shock Syndrome and the Philadelphia outbreak of Legionnaires disease combined,” which were two high-profile public health emergencies in the 1980s (NBC's Earliest Report on AIDS 1982). In 1981 the *New York Times* published only three stories on AIDS and three additional the following year, none of which made the front page. By contrast, “the cyanide-laced Tylenol pills that killed seven people in 1982 resulted in a massive media panic, with the *New York Times* covering the story every single day that October” (Brier). The media clearly was not uninterested in public health issues, so one can only conclude that it was the type of people afflicted with the disease that caused them to shy away from bringing it widespread attention. Historian Jennifer Brier explains, “The total apathy in the mainstream press was because the people who were dying in the early 1980s were not newsworthy. At the time, this was about profound homophobia and unwillingness to talk about gay male lives. Beyond that, whenever an AIDS story ran it was linked to white gay men, as if that somehow explained the course of the disease” (Brier).

If the press was not reporting on an issue, or if they were doing it in a disparaging or condemning way, it was difficult for the public to stay informed and in turn hold the government accountable. However, there is proof that there was at least some interest from the press on what

the government was planning to do about a mysterious illness that was becoming deadlier by the day.

## **Section 2: Press Conferences and Prejudice within the Administration**

The Reagan Administration's attitude toward the growing AIDS crisis is best illustrated by the White House press conferences from 1982 onward. In these audio clips, Press Secretary Larry Speakes consistently deflects and mocks questions regarding AIDS primarily asked by journalist Reverend Lester Kinsolving. Whenever the subject comes up he seems mildly annoyed and preoccupied with getting onto the next topic, and there is not a trace of seriousness in his or any other journalist's voice. On October 15, 1982, Kinsolving asked Speakes the first public question about AIDS during a White House press briefing. Kinsolving asks if the president has any reaction that the CDC announced "A-I-D-S is now an epidemic in over 600 cases?" When Speakes responds that he does not have any information on it, Kinsolving continues, "Over a third of them have died, it's known as 'gay plague'" which is met with laughter by the press pool. Kinsolving defends, "No it's a pretty serious thing.... one in three people that get this have died and I was wondering if the president was aware of this?" Speakes gets the reporters laughing again when he jokes, "I don't have it do you?" Kinsolving plays along and asks one final time, "In other words, the White House looks on this as a great joke?" Speakes brushes him off by saying there has been "no personal experience here" (Calonico).

It is implied that Kinsolving continued to bring up the issue in other press briefings when in June 1983 another reporter mentions "fairy tales" during a White House press briefing and Speakes quips, "Lester's ears perked up when you said fairies ... he has an abiding interest in

that.” When another journalist brings up the question of funding for AIDS, Speakes says that the president “ordered that a higher priority be given to research on it ... we have recently asked that \$12 million be reprogrammed for research on AIDS.” Kinsolving goes on to ask somewhat seriously, “Larry, does the president think it might help if he suggested that the gays cut down on their cruising?” to which the press pool snickers and Speakes mutters, “Told you didn’t I?” in reference to his interest. Speakes tells him that if they come up with “any research that sheds some light on whether gays should cruise or not cruise we’ll make it available to you” mockingly, which is received with laughter (Calonico).

In December 1984 at which point the AIDS epidemic has gained widespread media attention and resulted in 4,200 deaths, Kinsolving brings up the issue again, but is overrun with laughter before he can finish saying “Centers for Disease Control” to which Speakes mutters “This is going to be an AIDS question.” Kinsolving addresses that the CDC report says “an estimated 300,000 people have been exposed to AIDS, which can be transmitted through saliva” as asks if the president will “take steps to protect armed forces, food, and medical services.” Speakes deadpan replies, “I don’t know.” Kinsolving, clearly angry with the dismissal inquires, “Is the president concerned about this subject, Larry?” Speakes says he “hasn’t heard him express concern.” At this point the press pool is snickering and heckling Kinsolving when he finally asks, “He has expressed no opinion about this epidemic?” to which Speakes laughs, “No but I must confess I haven’t asked him about it.” Kinsolving tries to press the issue but is practically laughed out of the room while other journalists can be heard in the background mockingly saying “Is the president going to ban mouth to mouth kissing?” The press conference ends with Speakes jeering, “Have you been checked?” and then “I don’t get paid enough” (Calonico).

The fact that Reagan's official spokesperson's only response to direct questions about a disease that was killing thousands of Americans was derisive laughter and homophobic jokes is disturbing, but not at all out of line with the administration's, and unfortunately much of the general public's, attitude at the time. However, Kinsolving is an example of the ability to separate personal opinions and professional duties, or even have some sanctity for human life. Kinsolving, a fierce opponent of gay rights, previously referred to LGBT rights organizations as "the sodomy lobby," but still felt the need to hold those in power accountable when he realized "AIDS wasn't that widely documented and it was barely reported." In a 2016 interview on the issue he said, "Speakes didn't even know what AIDS was. He responded by trying to make fun of me. I read about it somewhere and I was very concerned, enough to ask about it at the White House. When I asked my question, he evaded and joked - I thought it was outrageous" (Leon). This is just one of many instances that proves that the Reagan Administration did not just steadfastly avoid the issue for four years, but actively sought to deter any progress or attention toward combating the epidemic for reasons founded in personal turned professional prejudice and political ambition.

### **Section 3: Blocks to Funding and Congressional Hearings**

One of the first items on Reagan's presidential agenda was reducing the size and interference of the federal government, which included slashing the budget and minimizing the role of federal programs. Unfortunately, the AIDS epidemic coincided with this motivation to cut federal spending at a time when government agencies like the CDC and the National Institute of

Health (NIH) desperately needed funding to research the outbreak of a mysterious, deadly new disease that they did not know how to control.

By mid-1983 it was apparent that there was some kind of dissonance between what was needed to combat the disease in the United States and what was actually happening. Representative Henry Waxman was a Democrat from California whose district included areas around Los Angeles that were the epicenters of the AIDS crisis. He was one of the prominent crusaders in the fight for federal attention, more specifically federal funding, for AIDS work. In both 1982 and 1983, the Reagan Administration proposed an exceedingly low budget for AIDS research that Congress ended up significantly raising, which the administration would then take credit for when questioned if they were doing enough for the cause. In the summer of 1983 there were several congressional hearings on the issue of the government's role in the AIDS crisis that Waxman presided over with testimonies from officials within the Reagan Administration, medical professionals, and grassroots activists who, at that time, had contributed more to the fight against AIDS than the federal government. At a hearing of the House Subcommittee on Health and the Environment in May 1983, Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Services, Dr. Edward Brandt claimed, "AIDS has been officially recognized by Secretary [of Health and Human Services] Heckler as the Department's highest priority emergency health problem" (Shilts). Waxman confronted Brandt about the proposed reduction of funding for AIDS research when the epidemic was only becoming a bigger problem, explicitly telling him, "Every day there are deaths that are a monument to your irresponsibility" (Shilts). Although the evidence was mounting, there did not seem to be any indication toward change within the Reagan Administration. This dysfunctional system is best summarized by Randy Shilts who stated, "The administration, of course, opposed the extra money, dispatching its agency chiefs to argue that

they had all the funding they could use. Once the money was passed by Congress, however, the administration would not put itself in the politically indelicate position of actually vetoing it. Ultimately, the money was made available, usually much later than the scientists needed it” (Shilts).

Two months later, leaders of activist groups that had thus far been imperative in the fight against AIDS made impassioned pleas to the federal government for assistance at a subcommittee hearing. Virginia Apuzzo, the Executive Director of the National Gay Task Force stated, “If we take a look at the Federal Government’s response to the AIDS crisis it leads unavoidably to the conclusion that within this administration, there is a sharp contrast between the rhetoric of concern and the reality of response. That failure is underscored when one looks at the record of the lesbian and gay community in filling in the gap” (Federal Response to AIDS). Stephen R. Endeen, the Executive Director of the Gay Rights National Lobby was even more incensed about the federal government’s unwillingness to help dying Americans.

Quite frankly, the Federal Government’s response to the AIDS crisis thus far remains a cruel joke. Since fiscal year 1981, when AIDS was first identified as an epidemic, the National Institute of Health, which is the largest medical research organization in the world, has spent only \$12 million on AIDS research to date. And yet the NIH has spent \$11.2 billion on other medical research since fiscal year 1981. In other words, only one-tenth of one percent of the NIH research budget has been spent on AIDS. Whether the reason, or excuse, is the inherent bureaucratic delays in responding to public health emergencies or it is another example of a far too common institutional homophobia by the Federal Government it has been inexcusable (Federal Response to AIDS).

People were beginning to take notice that there was definitely something more at play than typical bureaucratic delays. Americans were dying by the thousands and the highest ranking medical organizations were not receiving the support they had been asking for four years. By comparison, “During the first two weeks of the Tylenol scare, the United States government spent \$10 million to find out what was happening” (Shilts). In December 1983, Congress released a report titled, News Release: House Report Documents Inadequate Response to AIDS. Henry Waxman is quoted as saying,

Tragically, funding levels for AIDS investigations have been dictated by political considerations rather than by the professional judgments of scientists and public health officials who are waging the battle against the epidemic. The inadequacy of funding, coupled with inexcusable delays in research activity, leads me to question the federal government’s preparedness for national health emergencies, as well as this administration’s commitment to an urgent resolution to the AIDS crisis. (Shilts)

Members of Congress were specifically calling out the Reagan Administration on its inability to properly address a national crisis that was killing people every day, and yet the president still had not even mentioned the word “AIDS” in public.

Many years later, medical professionals who had been at the forefront of the fight against AIDS openly condemned the apathy with which the Reagan Administration handled the epidemic, calling it “public health malpractice” (Interview Don Francis). Dr. Donald P. Francis of the CDC hit constant roadblocks in his effort in combating the spread of AIDS due to the federal government’s unwillingness to fund or even address the issue. Francis attributes this to a cult of homophobia and political interests that were intent on drastically reducing the role of the government, the ramifications of which we still feel today. In an interview almost two decades

after the beginning of the epidemic he stated, “public health was undermined [from] doing its required effort to stop an epidemic, and that...the highest authorities in the United States really inhibited us at CDC and set the stage to really help the outbreak spread” (Interview Don Francis).

Francis goes on to say that despite the lack of support, he and his team persevered in bringing attention to what they knew for certain was a major national health emergency. They proposed a prevention plan that included testing, education, and counseling for AIDS that would cost \$30 million to \$40 million per year. It was approved by the CDC and sent to Washington where it was rejected with the instructions for the healthcare professionals involved to “look pretty and do as little as possible” (Interview Don Francis). The idea of the highest level of government telling the medical community to “do as little as possible” during a national epidemic is more than disturbing; it is terrifying. Dr. Francis, who was on the front lines during the AIDS battle, does not hesitate to assign blame to the Reagan Administration for allowing an epidemic to spread at the cost of thousands of lives.

I despise Ronald Reagan and the people around him for what they did to public health in the United States and the rest of the world. He's seen as a benign individual by most, as a nice man trying his best, but this man did not have the appropriate understanding of the responsibility of government protecting citizens. Regardless of what a nice man he was, I don't give the benefit [of the doubt] to nice people who do bad things, and either he or the people he surrounded himself with did bad things. I don't know their reasons behind this, but they could not be convinced, despite our great attempts to go to high levels and convince them, that

there was something going on that needed major government involvement to intervene (Interview Don Francis).

Though history may generally remember him as a champion of conservatism and personal liberty, people such as Dr. Francis and those affected by AIDS tend to be unable to look past his willful ignorance, and even antagonism, toward the fight against a disease that was killing Americans at an alarming rate. From this we can see how the Reagan Administration's political agenda was given higher priority than the lives of thousands of Americans and the lengths the federal government was willing to go to reach its goals. This coupled with the powerful influence of the vehemently hateful and homophobic New Right created a perfect storm whose course could only be altered by an act of extreme will. Ultimately, the answer to this systemic, political issue was the rise of grassroots organizations, which would be responsible for gaining the national attention the AIDS epidemic desperately needed.

## Chapter 4

### The People Rise Up – Grassroots Activism

It is clear that the Reagan Administration did not respond adequately to the AIDS epidemic for reasons ranging from the political clout of the religious right to the lack of funding appropriated to medical resources in the name of less government spending. Of course, no one felt the effects of this political inaction more than those directly impacted by AIDS, many of whom lived and died before President Reagan would publicly address the epidemic in 1987.

The gay community in the United States was accustomed to living on the fringes of society, often occupying sects of urban spaces in New York and California predominantly. For a great number of people, these communities served as accepting surrogate families since many were estranged from their own. That is why it was all the more shocking when members of these close communities started falling ill and dying from a mysterious disease in the early 1980s. Those who lived through this heartbreaking and confusing time describe watching their friends die and attending “more funerals than birthday parties” in those turbulent years (Altman).

When it became clear that the country was going to ignore their struggle because society had deemed them unfavorable, people took matters into their own hands by forming what many consider the first postmodern activist movement. These early activist groups established call centers, raised money for research, and ultimately fought an ugly fight to receive attention from their country that all but told them it did not matter if they died. It is because of their efforts that AIDS got the awareness that it did at the time, and the country was better prepared when the disease inevitably spread to the people that society decided were worth saving.

## Section 1: How AIDS Turned the Tide of the Gay Rights Movement

Before 1980, the gay rights movement in the United States mostly revolved around discouraging discrimination based on sexual orientation, repealing anti-sodomy laws in state constitutions, and essentially gaining general public acceptance of homosexuality. Reagan said very little about the issue of gay rights on the campaign trail in 1980, which was not unusual for the time, but he did voice his criticism that the gay movement “isn’t just asking for civil rights; it’s asking for recognition and acceptance of an alternative lifestyle which I do not believe society can condone, nor can I” (Clews).

As explained in the first part of this chapter, a return to traditional family values was widely favored in response to the cultural revolution that had taken place in the 1960s and 1970s. If the gay community did not face discrimination before, they certainly did in this new era of trying to reverse what many considered to be the moral decline of the country, and the fact that many of them were afflicted with a deadly, incurable disease did not help matters. Despite the fact that the medical community had ruled out casual contact as an agent in the spread of AIDS by 1983, many patients still faced discrimination. There are accounts of hospital staff leaving food trays outside of patients’ rooms, not changing bedpans so the sick were left to sit in their own filth, and generally neglected AIDS patients. It was not until 1992 that the American Medical Association declared that “a physician may not ethically refuse to treat a patient” who is HIV positive, a problem that many seeking care faced in the beginning of the 1980s (Altman). In many states, it was legal to be fired on the basis of one’s sexual orientation, and having AIDS was a sure way to be outed and unemployed. For its part, the Reagan Administration had little to say about any type of discrimination except that it was a matter that should be left up to the states.

This was a time when gay rights was not a decisive issue in elections, even among the gay community. According to Randy Shilts, any significant political activism in that sphere was limited to actual civil rights organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). If anything, people were more concerned with local elections that would affect their day to day lives in the cities (Shilts). This mindset of flying under the radar in the political realm changed in the 1980s when AIDS raged through gay communities, a population the government refused to recognize. The gay community could no longer afford to be politically inactive when AIDS was becoming a very political issue.

## **Section 2: If We Don't, Who Will?**

Community-based activist groups emerged almost immediately following the outbreak of AIDS. One of the first and best known was the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) based in New York City. It was founded in September 1981, just two months after the first reported case of Kaposi's sarcoma, by Larry Kramer, who would go on to be one of the most prominent figures in the AIDS fight. The GMHC initially established hotlines for counseling and information, published educational materials, and set up "buddy programs" wherein a volunteer from the organization would accompany a sick person throughout the hospital visits and treatment process since many found themselves without a caretaker (Altman).

The original grassroots activist groups were not as focused on getting the national attention they so desperately needed, but instead on caring for the ailing and sick in their own communities. During its first year, the GMHC raised \$150,000 by collecting donations outside of gay bars and discos, most of which went to AIDS research. Rodger McFarlane, the executive

director of the GMHC and its primary organizer, understood the uphill battle that they were going to face. By the time the GMHC had amassed to 250 volunteers crammed in a brownstone in the East Village in Manhattan in 1983, McFarlane lamented, “We were forced to take care of ourselves because we learned that if you have certain diseases, certain lifestyles, you can’t expect the same services as other parts of society” (Altman). Even in the 1980s in the United States, six decades after women’s suffrage and just two decades after the Civil Rights Act, being something other than what was generally considered “normal” by societal standards could mean death.

In addition to the GMHC, the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmFAR) was founded in 1983 by physician Joseph Sonnabend, which was primarily concerned with research funding. Out of AmFAR came the Community Research Initiative (CRI) whose purpose was to employ scientific expertise that would not be bogged down by bureaucracy. At the time, other countries such as France and the United Kingdom praised the initiative of the United States’ grassroots activist organizations. However, it is worth noting that much of what private groups do in the United States is necessary because the federal government fails to provide services taken for granted elsewhere.

Another obstacle that grassroots AIDS activists faced was the question of whether to frame this as a gay issue or a health issue. Of course, it would turn out to be a national health crisis that happened to only affect gay men at its inception, but at the time no one knew this. Many political figures such as Pat Buchanan and religious leaders like Jerry Falwell were eager to spin it as a gay issue to support their claims that AIDS was a plague sent from God to punish homosexuals (Altman). Apparently the Reagan Administration saw it as a gay issue as well because health issues were typically worth the national spotlight. For example, in 1976 the Ford Administration mobilized a national vaccination campaign against a new strain of illness called

swine flu which was feared might become an epidemic. President Ford was even televised getting vaccinated before the fear quickly dissipated and the epidemic never came to fruition. Understandably, the gay community was frustrated that “a hypothetical epidemic received far greater public attention from President Ford than this very real one from President Reagan” (Altman).

### **Section 3: A Political Game**

By 1983, many activist groups had gotten past the initial shock of scrambling to provide care and resources for those affected by AIDS in their immediate communities. Virginia Apuzzo, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, knew that lobbying the federal government would be necessary to combat the spread of the disease. Finally, in the summer of 1983, the first two recorded meetings on AIDS took place. The first meeting convened on June 21 at the Department of Health and Human Services, not the White House like most meetings of the sort. In attendance were Virginia Apuzzo, future Task Force executive director Jeff Levi, staff members from the Department of Health and Human Services, and special assistant to the president for public liaison, Judi Buckalew (Brier). Apuzzo and Levi reportedly urged higher federal spending on AIDS, but understood that the meeting was mainly about getting acquainted in order to open the door for more meetings. Unfortunately, these meetings would never happen. The second meeting that summer concerning the AIDS epidemic did not include gay community representatives, but conservative activists. They encouraged the Office of Public Liaison and

President Reagan to close gay bathhouses, require all blood donors to fill out a form detailing sexual habits, and become more visual and vocal about AIDS efforts (Brier).

Two months later, Apuzzo and others were testified in front of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education. In her testimony, Apuzzo denounced the Reagan Administration's minimal response to AIDS and made her case for increased funding for AIDS research at the CDC and NIH. She also expressed pride in the efforts of the gay community in combating the disease, but emphasized that they cannot possibly bear the full responsibility of funding research needed for the AIDS epidemic. "If we take a look at the federal government's response to the AIDS crisis it leads unavoidably to the conclusion that within this administration, there is a sharp contrast between the rhetoric of concern and the reality of response. That failure is underscored when one looks at the record of the lesbian and gay community in filling the gap" (Federal Response to AIDS).

Ultimately, Congress was able to increase the federal budget for AIDS research partially as a result of these hearings, but the matter still remained that America was three years into a national health crisis with no vaccine, immunization, or cure in sight. The president had yet to make a public statement about AIDS or meet personally with anyone fighting the disease and 5,596 people would die before the year's end (Thirty Years of HIV/AIDS: Snapshots of an Epidemic). Unfortunately, true change would only come during Reagan's second term when activists, confident in their numbers and angrier than ever before, would make themselves a force unable to ignore.

#### Section 4: A National Spotlight

AIDS activist groups soon became much more organized and much less docile. Attempts to lobby the government had been a fruitless effort, so a new approach was taken. As activist Peter Staley describes it, those affected by AIDS, which had by now extended beyond the gay community, stopped hiding in the shadows and being complacent. “Instead, the public saw organized anger and determination” (Staley). They may not be able to convince Americans to accept them, but they could make them uncomfortable by confronting them with the fact that they were letting thousands of people suffer and die.

The most influential group to come out of the AIDS crisis was the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, commonly known as ACT UP. Founded by Larry Kramer upon his departure from the GMHC, ACT UP took cues from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s by employing methods such as boycotts, marches, demonstrations, and nonviolent civil disobedience. The organization planned to use these actions to get the media attention they had been denied for years. Previous efforts such as the GMHC’s April 1985 Madison Square Garden fundraiser that drew 18,000 people including New York City mayor Edward Koch failed to get coverage by major media outlets such as the *New York Times* (Altman). ACT UP’s original goal was to gain widespread media attention and demand the release of experimental drugs. Over five years into the epidemic, the only drug available on the market for AIDS victims was the highly expensive and toxic azidothymidine, or AZT. Additionally, experimental treatments conducted by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) were routinely done on healthy people, despite the fact that many willing AIDS patients were desperately lobbying to try anything that might save their lives.

Some of ACT UP's most widely covered demonstrations included a march on Wall Street to gain access to experimental treatments to fight the disease and a march on the FDA in New York. The demonstration outside the FDA was regarded as the most successful and effective actions of the movement, which actually shut down the FDA for a day. Between 1,000 and 1,500 protesters blocked doors, walkways, and streets by sitting or laying down while chanting and waving banners. Over 100 people were arrested during the protest and the media covered it extensively, claiming it was the largest civil demonstration since the Vietnam War. In the end, ACT UP presented the FDA with a list of demands in line with the agency's drug approval process that would make treatments available more quickly. This event turned the tide for AIDS activism, as "government agencies dealing with AIDS, particularly the FDA and NIH, began to listen to us, include us in decision making, and even ask for our input" (Crimp). Finally, AIDS was beginning to get the amount of attention it had been seeking for nearly half a decade.

ACT UP also advocated for other education programs to be applied on a national level. They advocated for the creation and implementation of a federal needle exchange program, federally controlled and funded condom distribution at the local level, and serious sex education education in primary and secondary schools monitored by the Department of Education. During this time many activist groups switched their focus and used their newfound media awareness to first, generate "insider" representation of the AIDS crisis, second, broaden the scope of the media's biased view of victims, third, counter any misinformation that could lead to fear or panic, and fourth, voice experiences and beliefs of those affected. At this point, AIDS activism was attempting to surpass the immobility of the federal government and go right to the people who could directly make a change.

In addition to ACT UP's movements, other activist groups employed tactics such as "zaps," pointed, highly personalized actions against a public figure often involving the guerilla-style infiltration of another group's event. The Lavender Hill Mob, another activist group, frequently zapped New York City council meetings as well as the CDC on one occasion. They criticized the slow, bureaucratic procedures in clinical trials that showed no sense of urgency and essentially made themselves enough of a liability that they actually made change happen.

Perhaps the most memorable and peaceful demonstration by AIDS activists was the placement of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The huge patchwork quilt was made up of almost 2,000 panels each measuring three by six feet, about the size of an average gravesite. Due to the stigma around AIDS victims, many funeral homes refused to handle the remains of the deceased, which left many family members and loved ones without a gravesite. The AIDS Memorial Quilt was a way to commemorate the lives of those who had been lost and was visited by over half a million people during its inaugural weekend (The AIDS Memorial Quilt).

The efforts of AIDS activists, specifically the gay community during the beginning of the crisis, was the most consistent force in bringing attention and aid to victims of a national epidemic. Realizing they were all but abandoned by their country, these groups came together and mobilized to save their own lives. Their activism interests such as educational materials, emotional support, and fundraising arguably saved more lives during those first few crucial years than the efforts of the federal government. Political attempts to lobby the government and testify before Congress proved to be ineffectual. As a result, AIDS activism then turned to more aggressive tactics, such as marches and demonstrations, that made them a force unable to be ignored. It is due to the unrelenting spirit of people who were determined to survive a plague that

their country was equally determined to ignore that the United States was able to fight the disease when it finally decided it was time. These activists paved the way for AIDS support in nearly all areas that were necessary to combat the epidemic. Ultimately, it took this confrontational, dynamic form of activism for true change to come about in the United States, although this would not come to fruition until well into President Reagan's second term, when the death toll from AIDS had risen to over 40,000 in the United States alone.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

Nearly six years after the CDC's initial report, President Reagan delivered his first public speech about AIDS on May 31, 1987, at which point 20,849 Americans had died from the disease. In the same breath he established a Presidential Commission on HIV, where the disease was declared "public health enemy number one" (President Reagan Delivers First Major Speech on AIDS Epidemic in 1987). However, the fight was far from over for those who had dedicated themselves to the battle against a disease that at this point had spread to the general public.

The second half of the decade was mostly concerned with how to frame the AIDS crisis now that the Reagan Administration had declared it an issue of public importance. At the time, one of the most widespread preventative campaigns was sex education, which often included distributing forms of birth control and educational pamphlets. This did not align with the Administration's stance that sex education should be relegated to the home and was not the responsibility of the federal government. Against the best wishes of his superiors, Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop made history in 1988 when he launched the first coordinated AIDS education campaign by mailing AIDS education materials to 107 million American households (The C. Everett Koop Papers). Although this action earned him significant criticism from conservative supporters, the campaign is now regarded as effective in terms of educating people and ultimately reducing the rate of new AIDS cases into the 1990s.

Additionally, AZT became the first FDA approved drug marketed to fight HIV. It was priced at \$10,000 per year, making it one of the most expensive drugs ever sold. This, coupled

with the fact that the drug was known to be extremely toxic, led people to protest once again at the lack of safe and accessible treatments available to victims over six years into the epidemic (GMHC/HIV/AIDS Timeline). Organizations such as ACT UP continued to protest into the 1990s, citing the absence of viable treatment options and the still-rampant stigmatization of those living with AIDS. The federal government may have decided to accept AIDS as a national health crisis, but the devastating effects of over half a decade of apathy were still being felt.

In spite of the horrific effects the epidemic had on thousands of Americans, its legacy has lived on in the form of film, television, and theater. Those who lived through the crisis, especially prominent figures in New York's gay scene, left behind painfully human testaments to their experiences that still reach people to this day. AIDS was a common theme in much of the media and art that came out of the late 1980s and 1990s. The positive reception of these works suggests that they may have helped people become more sympathetic to the issue and those affected by it. Larry Kramer's 1985 play, *The Normal Heart*, told the autobiographical story of political activism in the gay community in New York City between the years of 1981 and 1984. It was also converted into a television movie in 2014. Randy Shilts' *And the Band Played On*, published in 1987, is an extensive account of the AIDS epidemic that examines the government, gay activist organizations, and the medical community. It is considered to be one of the most comprehensive analyses of the AIDS crisis and it is referenced in this thesis several times. Like *The Normal Heart*, a film version was made in 1993. Additionally, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* is another play that deals with themes of homosexuality and AIDS in the United States in the 1980s. It also ran as a miniseries on HBO and had a limited run on Broadway in 2018. Finally, the movie *Philadelphia* starring Denzel Washington and Tom Hanks became the first major film to deal with themes of homophobia and discrimination in 1993 when it won two

Academy Awards. The popularity and longevity of these works gives people an opportunity to understand an issue that was not communicated to them by the government or the press during the crisis. In this way, these works of art do more for posterity than the records in history textbooks might show.

The AIDS epidemic of the 1980s represents a failure of the United States to properly communicate with its citizens during a national health crisis, although it is hardly remembered as such. There are very few publications about the Reagan years that even mention AIDS, and even fewer that discuss the oversight of the federal government. This evasion of history is extremely dangerous and serves as a threat only to future generations. History is about understanding the past so that we can make a better future, and that includes the unsavory aspects that might not be seen as kind to the people we admire.

The contributing factors identified in this thesis such as extremist ideologies, the disenfranchisement of minorities, and conflicts of interest among the nation's leaders are still issues today. If we cannot recognize and address the elements that allowed such an egregious oversight to occur, then we have no hope of learning from them and preventing it from happening again. The AIDS crisis should serve as an example of the consequences that can arise from the inability to communicate effectively, short-sighted prejudices, and political agendas, but first it needs to be recognized as such.

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## ACADEMIC VITA

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### Academic Vita of Christine Kavanagh

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Education: The Pennsylvania State University – Schreyer Honors College  
Major(s) and Minor(s): Communication Arts & Sciences and Telecommunications  
Honors: Communication Arts & Sciences

Thesis Title: “Look Pretty and Do As Little As Possible:” An Examination of the Reagan Administration’s Response to the AIDS Crisis  
Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Stephen Browne

#### Work Experience

**Client Management Intern • *Digitas Health (Publicis Healthcare Communications Group)***  
**06/17 – 08/17**

**New York, NY**

- Assisted the Rebif® account team on over 50 projects over a three-month period.
- Facilitated communications between the company and clients through progress reports and email.
- Finalized in an intern-wide competition to pitch an original campaign strategy to the Skin Cancer Foundation.

**Public Relations Director • *Penn State University Speaking Center***  
**08/15 – 08/16**

**University Park, PA**

- Responsible for contacting different university departments and outside publications to inform students and faculty about the services offered by the center.
- Designed flyers and maintain other forms of media outreach.

**Global Scholar • *CIEE: Council on International Education Exchange***  
**08/16 – 12/16**

**London, United Kingdom; Paris, France; Rome, Italy**

- Pioneered an experimental education abroad program across three major European cities.
- Completed additional coursework and created digital media content while learning about social, political, and cultural differences in different countries.

#### Campus Involvement and Leadership Experience

**Paterno Fellows Program, The College of the Liberal Arts**  
**1/16-present**

- Honors program including advanced academic coursework, thesis, study abroad, internship, ethics study and leadership/service commitment.

**Communications Committee Member • *Penn State Dance Marathon (THON)***  
**09/15-present**

- Facilitated the overall operations of THON, the largest student-run philanthropy in the world benefitting children and families affected by pediatric cancer.

- Managed information booths during THON weekend to answer all questions visitors or families need to know.

**Operations Coordinator • *Movin' On Music Festival***

**09/15-present**

- Managed all day-of operations for Penn State's annual music festival including rest facilities, food pavilions, and technical preparations.
- Assisted big name talent such as Walk the Moon and Nelly with last minute needs during the festival.
- Worked closely with local businesses and service providers in order to build a strong relationship that allows everything to run smoothly the day of the festival.

Grants Received: *Chapel Executive Internship Scholarship*

International Education (including service-learning abroad): CIEE Global Scholars Program (London, Paris, Rome) Fall 2016