

**A Generation Lost**  
*Reagan's Culpability in the HIV/AIDS Epidemic*

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To many, the 1980s ushers in fond memories of vibrant fashion, classic music, and iconic pop culture, but to a large segment of the American people, it was the start to a decades long nightmare that wiped almost an entire generation off the face of the Earth. Five months after actor-turned politician Ronald Reagan is inaugurated as President of the United States in 1981,

the CDC published its first report regarding a concerning new illness that has begun appearing in young gay men in New York and Los Angeles. What follows throughout the next seven years is a pattern of negligence and indifference on the part of the Reagan administration to the mounting crisis of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. A failure of American government comparable to the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic by Donald Trump's administration four decades later, the systemic apathy of Reagan's response, or lack there-of, was a major contributor to the severity of the epidemic and to the almost 100,000 deaths that occurred by the end of his second term.

When previously healthy gay and bisexual identifying men in major US cities began to fall ill with unidentifiable flu-like symptoms and lung infections, doctors began to report their concerns to the news media. On June 3rd of 1981, the CDC released a *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* detailing this phenomenon, and exactly a month later the New York Times published an article entitled "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals", introducing the idea of the "Gay Cancer" into the public lexicon. By the end of the summer, 108 cases were reported, with 40% of patients already having passed away, and the roots of this horrifying epidemic had been firmly planted into American society. Almost a year later in September of 1982, the CDC uses the word "AIDS" (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), classifying it as "A disease at least moderately predictive of a defect in cell-mediated immunity, occurring in a person with no known cause for diminished resistance to that disease." AIDS describes the late stages of HIV infection (Human Immunodeficiency Viruses), and though the illness has long been stigmatized as only a problem for men who engage in sexual activity with other men, anyone can fall victim, with upwards of 32 million people (including women and children) having succumbed to

HIV/AIDS since the start of the epidemic (Hiv.gov).

Following the climax of liberalism in the 1960's; a period marked by the Civil Rights Movement, environmental activism, and the expansion of welfare, a cultural divide reared its head within American society. Fueled by a desire to return to religious fundamentalism and "traditional" American values, the New Right emerged. This staunchly conservative segment of the population aimed to counter what they viewed as the "liberal establishment" (Haberman). As televangelism spread increasingly right-wing ideals to a national audience, more and more people began organize in opposition to the legalisation of abortion, the feminist movement, and any other hint of progressivism. Religious leaders took note of the public's dissatisfaction with the large, liberal federal government, and began working to establish neoconservative, christian power structures in Washington. Perhaps the most notable of these imposing figures was Jerry Falwell; a megachurch founder and televangelist from Virginia who created the Moral Majority; an organization dedicated to the promotion of the conservative agenda, in 1979. Falwell was outspoken against the apparent decay of American moral integrity, and his explanation behind his interest in politics was, "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" (Kavanagh). Millions of dollars flooded into groups associated with the New Right, and the advent of the Moral Majority and its counterparts ushered in a period of flagrant blurring between the lines of church and state.

A linchpin of the New Right, due to conservative-America's dedication to "traditional family values" and the influence of Christianity, was a deep-rooted and profoundly hateful attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community. These homophobic sentiments were dispersed

nationally through radio and television programs, with preachers such as Walter Alexander of Reno's First Baptist Church using their platforms to promote extremist views such as, "I think we should do what the Bible says and cut their [homosexuals'] throats" (Kavanagh). Opposition to what conservative Americans saw as a "gay agenda," was channeled into legislative actions through organisations like the Moral Majority, funnelling funding and votes to politicians who promised to uphold specific neoconservative moral and social visions (Eaklor). This combination of evangelist prejudice and political power proved dangerous to the livelihood of Queer people, not just because of the revived descrimination they faced by large swaths of the populace, but also through the election of President Ronald Reagan, an actor-turned-governor who provided a pipeline for New Right ideology to penetrate the highest levels of US government. By 1975, over 25% of American adults considered themselves to be born-again Christians, and Republicans recognized the necessity of mobilizing these citizens in support of their party (Bennington-Castro). Reagan - a divorcee and infrequent churchgoer - found massive popularity among the conservative voter bloc. He channelled charisma and optimism to re energize a population demoralized by recession and the aftershocks of the Vietnam War, and paid special attention to the evangelical power structures that now enthusiastically backed his Party (US Department of the Interior). Reagan himself could not have made this any less clear when at a Dallas campaign event for religious leaders he said, "I know you can't endorse me....but I want you to know I endorse you" (Kavanagh). Jerry Falwell, a man who later claimed that "AIDS was the wrath of God upon homosexuals," is often credited with giving Reagan two-thirds of the white evangelical vote, and Reagan acted accordingly. Once President, no time was wasted in electing a very neoconservative cabinet, appointing the likes of C. Everett Koop - a vehement

pro life advocate - as Surgeon General, and fundamentalist Christian educator Robert Billings a prominent position within the Department of Education (Kavanagh). These circumstances set up an environment where it was in the Reagan administration's apparent best interest to ignore LGBTQ+ citizens, and even reinforce discrimination against them.

Dr Marcus Conant, a professor of dermatology in San Francisco and one of the first physicians to encounter and treat AIDS, perfectly encapsulates the mindset the Reagan administration had going into the epidemic when describing a conversation he had with a White House liaison for medical care in 1983. Conant recounts the representative dismissing the concerns of the epidemiologists and doctors present and stating that, "[AIDS] was a legal problem, not a medical problem." Simply because of who gay men with AIDS were and who their sexual partners were, she told him, "these people were breaking the law". This attitude permeated every part of the administration, with Conant later meeting with the Assistant Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, Dr Edward N Brandt Jr, who told Conant and his colleagues that they were the first homosexuals he had ever met (La Ganga). To those in power, gay people in America were seen as such a small minority of the population that the issues affecting them did not even warrant concern. Throughout the 1980s, much of the media reflected the beliefs of those who felt that LGBTQ+ individuals - and more specifically gay men - were promiscuous, immoral, and perhaps even deserving of the horrific nature of AIDS. Reagan's failure to acknowledge the epidemic's existence and act accordingly reflected the views of his constituents, and the finesse of his apathetic approach had deadly consequences. During White House press conferences in 1982, 1983, and 1982, Press Secretary Larry Speakes fielded questions from journalist Lester Kinsolving regarding the ongoing crisis, each time

proving beyond a shadow of doubt that the wellbeing of gay Americans was not a priority of the administration. Audio recordings of these encounters include much laughter on the sides of both journalists and Speakes, and Kinsolving is repeatedly shut down and demeaned when simply inquiring as to whether the President had expressed *any* concerns about the situation (Calonico). In the mid-1980s, a time when infections in the US peaked at around 150,000 new cases a year, a stunning exchange occurred between Speakes and Kinsolving, with Reagan's spokesman admitting that he had not to that point ever heard the President speak on the issue of AIDS at all, and in fact, though the subject of what he referred to as the "Gay Plague" came up annually in press conferences, he had never actually questioned Reagan on his views (Dreyfuss).

The neglect of this national emergency was not completely accepted by all members of Reagan's administration, which highlights the deliberate nature of their inaction. Even Dr C. Everett Koop, an otherwise staunchly conservative individual, recognized that urgent action was necessary to save thousands of lives, but has since said that due to "interdepartmental politics" he was denied access to any conversation on the AIDS crisis for the first five years of Reagan's presidency (White). Eventually in 1988, a year after the federal government slowly began to move towards a more coordinated response to the issue, Koop took the unprecedented step of mailing AIDS education materials to over 100 million American households (Kavanagh). This action drew massive amounts of criticism from prominent New Right voices, but ultimately allowed Reagan to deflect responsibility for the campaign.

Aside from just establishing an environment of dismissal and discomfort in regards to any AIDS/HIV conversation, the Reagan White House also contributed massively to the slow federal response to the epidemic. Allocating funding for AIDS related research or assistance was

strongly opposed by the administration, and in 1981 and 1982 they proposed an absurdly low budget to be directed towards the crisis. Eventually Congress was able to increase this amount (hidden amongst funding for Toxic Shock Syndrome and Legionnaires Disease), but the administration was quick to credit themselves with this, as any clear indication of their lack of cooperation would have adversely impacted their image (Bennington-Castro). However, when considered in the scheme of governmental response to more socially acceptable health concerns, the money funnelled towards the AIDS crisis was miniscule. From June of 1981 when the disease first appeared on the public's radar, and through 1982, *less* than \$1 million went towards AIDS, while \$9 million was spent on Legionnaires Disease. 1,000 people had already been killed by HIV/AIDS and only 50 from Legionnaires (Kavanagh). Within two weeks of the Tylenol Scare in 1982, the United States spent \$10 million on research, but it would take Reagan three more years to even publicly mention AIDS (Kramer). It was easy for Reagan to deny resources for this public health emergency, as true to his campaign promises to trim federal spending, he quickly cut budgets to both the CDC and National Institutes of Health. In October of 1985, Congress was finally able to allocate \$190 million in funding towards AIDS research, this large sum being \$70 million more than the administration's request (Bennington-Castro). Finally the United States moved towards actually addressing the catastrophic damage that AIDS was wreaking on the country's Queer citizens. However this response was simply too little too late for the tens of thousands of patients who had already passed, and the years of inaction on the part of Reagan's administration would continue to have devastating effects on the trajectory of the epidemic.

From the outset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, individuals and small grassroots groups

organized to provide funding, diagnosis, and care to the rapidly multiplying numbers of Americans infected with the disease. Faced with disgust, ignorance, and hatred on the parts of the medical and political establishments of the time, gay advocates took it upon themselves to respond to the catastrophe that was ravaging their community. Larry Kramer is perhaps one of the most notable figures of this mobilization. A playwright and gay rights advocate from New York City, Kramer formed the Gay Men's Health Crisis in 1981 (Chang). Angered by the indifference of state and federal government response to the alarming spread of disease, Kramer penned an essay for the *New York Native* in 1983 that channeled his belief that, "If you write a calm letter and fax it to nobody, it sinks like a brick in the Hudson." This open letter titled, '1,112 and Counting' (reference to the number of diagnosed AIDS patients at the time), is representative of the passion and fear that led the gay community to come together and work to save their peers when they saw that no one else would (Kramer). Encapsulated best by the popular slogan "IF WE DON'T WHO WILL", gay and lesbian activists formed networks to support their HIV positive friends and family. Though they worked on promoting legislative change, the main focus of such groups (whether formally organized or not), was to provide comfort to the ill. Friends took friends to the hospital, affiliated lawyers helped write wills, and the Queer communities in hardhit cities made sure someone was there to hold your hand when you inevitably passed away (Aizenman). Kramer later went on to found AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), an organization whose ethos was "United in anger", and who used confrontational but effective techniques to draw attention to their cause and influence political change. In 1988, ACT UP held a demonstration that received national media attention when they occupied the FDA for an entire day with demands for the Agency to implement changes that

would make experimental drugs more accessible (Aizenman). They were granted their requests, and the group continued to expand their protest portfolio, staging many successful events in places like Wall Street and the 6th International AIDS Conference in San Francisco. LGBTQ+ activists saw the inaction of Reagan's government, and without the mobilisation of such individuals across the country, many more lives would have been lost to the epidemic.

HIV/AIDS was something that much of the world considered to be a problem only for promiscuous gay men, intravenous drug users, or some other disenfranchised and minority group. However this viewpoint failed to look beyond societal bias and discomfort to recognize the risk the disease posed to every person, of every sexuality, gender, age or race. As of 2021, Antiretroviral therapy (ART), and hundreds of other medications have massively reduced HIV's spread, and the life expectancy of AIDS patients has increased exponentially, but in the United States, the scars left by failure to kill the epidemic at its start can still be plainly seen. The disease reached its peak between 1987 and 1998, and during that period, the personal, social, psychological, and community lives of male gay "Baby Boomers" (those born 1946-1964) underwent extreme damage (Rosenfeld). In that decade, AIDS killed around 324,029 men and women in the US, with 10% of the 1.6 *million* gay and bisexual identifying men between the ages of 25-44 having died. Today, nearly all older gay men in America have had their lives impacted to some extent, with the vast majority of survivors having had their entire community disappear (Rosenfeld). The conservative attitudes of much of the population during this time meant that instead of empathy, gay men who had lost all of their friends and partners to AIDS, were met with ostracization and discrimination. The very psyche of the individuals who underwent the trauma of the epidemic is forever changed, and an entire generation of Queer men

was lost.

The conservative mindset championed by the likes of Ronald Reagan in the second half of the 20th century welcomed decreased government oversight and traditional values, but came at the price of hundreds of thousands of innocent lives. The indifference of Reagan's administration to the public health crisis posed by HIV/AIDS proved to be a major factor in the severity of the epidemic, and the decimation of Queer communities across the country. Though grassroots groups worked hard to make up the ground lost by governmental neglect, the nature of the President's prejudice, and a religiously-influenced political agenda ultimately crushed any hope of early and effective action to turn the tide on this tragedy.

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