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"Will the Last Person Alive in Chelsea Please Turn Out the Lights?": Tracing Anti-Gay Rhetoric and Governmental Neglect During the AIDS Crisis

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Introduction

On October 5, 1992, David Robinson walked toward 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W. in Washington, DC, a small cardboard box with gold lamé paper in hand. Inside the box was a plastic bag containing the ashes of his partner, Warren Krause, who had died due to complications from Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in April of that same year. Though the journey had started with only a few hundred members of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), some with ashes of their own to carry, by the time the group reached the White House, their numbers had swollen to thousands. Despite an attempt by police officers on horseback to stop them, they managed to reach the wrought-iron fence surrounding the North Lawn. There, Robinson took the box containing the remains of his partner, who had just months ago been a living human being, and poured its contents through the fence.[1] The ashes of Warren Krause and dozens of others whose lives were cut short came together and blew in the wind across the neat, manicured landscape of the White House, a dusty and physical reminder of an ugly legacy of neglect that began with its previous administration.

The first reported cases of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in the United States occurred in the early 1980s. Because many sectors of United States society perceived the disease to appear only among gay men, it was initially termed Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID), or colloquially known as "gay cancer."[2] Although other social groups succumbed to the same illness very early in the epidemic, AIDS remained a "gay" disease and initially received very little mainstream attention. Even as cases rose dramatically in the early years of the AIDS epidemic, signaling an undisputable public health crisis, President Ronald Reagan never mentioned its existence. As a result of this government dismissal of the illness, no public policy was created to

1 Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993* (New York, New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2021), 604-608.

2 "HIV/AIDS: Snapshots of an Epidemic," amfAR, accessed November 16, 2021, https://www.amfar.org/thirty-years-of-hiv/aids-snapshots-of-an-epidemic/.

prevent the spread of AIDS, and little to no funding was allocated towards AIDS research to secure a cure.

By 1986 there had been 24,559 deaths linked to AIDS complications from an overall 28,712 cases reported, and yet Reagan had still not uttered the word AIDS in public.[3] Caught in the crossfire between gay liberation activists and homophobic politicians, the communities most impacted by the rising death toll began to grow angry. It was then that AIDS activism began in earnest. Activists soon established organizations such as ACT UP and Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) in a desperate attempt to save the lives of men, women, and children affected with AIDS in the face of gross governmental negligence rooted in a political ultra-conservative political climate against the burgeoning gay liberation movement. This paper will trace responses to the AIDS crisis during a historical moment understood as a cultural war through the examination of anti-gay rhetoric in the late 1970s to demonstrate its influence in a broader policy of governmental neglect by the Ronald Reagan administration and his public health appointees in the first crucial years of the AIDS epidemic. The conclusion drawn from this evidence indicates that anti-gay rhetoric heavily influenced health policy decisions early in the AIDS epidemic. This widely accepted bias against the LGBT community ultimately contributed to more deaths from AIDS. Concurrently, it examines how that same neglect led to grassroots organizing by the LGBT community, eventually creating important changes in how people with AIDS (P.W.A.s) were perceived and treated.

Historiography

To better comprehend why the Reagan administration failed to provide adequate resources to those affected by the AIDS epidemic, it is necessary to examine right-wing backlash to the burgeoning gay rights movement in the years prior to the AIDS epidemic. Vocal reactionary attitudes contributed to the public acceptance of the mistreatment of P.W.A.s.

In his book *Stand by Me: The Forgotten History of Gay Liberation*, Jim Downs illustrated the central role anti-gay spokeswoman Anita Bryant had in the politics against a governmental response to AIDS and the Gay Liberation movement. In the book, he noted that Bryant's "Save Our Children" campaign directly responded to growing demand from queer people insisting on full inclusion in religious settings. Downes argued that, though many Christians had long been preaching against homosexuality, they "did not have a mainstream political outlet until Bryant emerged as their conduit."[4] Religious

3 "HIV/AIDS: Snapshots of an Epidemic," amfAR, accessed November 16, 2021, https://www.amfar.org/thirty-years-of-hiv/aids-snapshots-of-an-epidemic/.

4 Jim Downs, *Stand By Me: The Forgotten History of Gay Liberation* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2020), 56.

leaders began to invite Bryant to speak at their events, providing a broader platform for her increasingly scathing sermons against homosexuality. Downs did not provide any detail regarding how many evangelicals identified with Bryant's rhetoric, but noted that research into other studies on her impact showed that her popularity was high during this time.[5]

In his article "From 'Gay is Good' to the Scourge of AIDS: The Evolution of Gay Liberation Rhetoric, 1977-1990," Dr. James Darsey, professor of communication at Georgia State University, examined the rise of anti-gay sentiment in the wake of earlier achievements by gay activists. Darsey noted that in the years prior to the rise of Bryant's national notoriety, "the gay liberation movement had been in a stage characterized as uncertain maturity."[6] Forceful demonstrations like the Stonewall Riots in 1969 had stopped by the 1980s. Instead, activists used more mundane actions tapping into the existing political system to effect change. According to Darsey, this resulted in less interest in the Gay Liberation movement, which primed the stage of conservative activism for people like Bryant. The Moral Majority movement, a reactionary branch of conservatism, fully supported presidential candidate Ronald Reagan.[7]

The role of the Moral Majority concerning the historical period under review was further discussed in Seth Dowland's article "'Family Values' and the Formation of a Christian Right Agenda." In the article, Dowland detailed the rise of Jerry Falwell, Sr., organizer of the Moral Majority movement, and how his rhetoric, along with that of other evangelical Christians, created a specific unifying idea of an America represented by the heteronormative nuclear family.[8] While the article mainly focused on the anti-abortion origins of the Moral Majority movement, the article mentioned its fight against gay rights activism. The anti-gay rhetoric propelled by the Moral Majority movement was further collaborated by the work of Clyde Wilcox in his article "Popular Support for the Moral Majority in 1980: A Second Look." Both articles provide context for Reagan's later rhetoric on AIDS.

Tina L Perez and George N. Dionisopoulos tackled the issue of AIDS in the Reagan administration in their article "Presidential Silence, C. Everett Koop, and the *Surgeon General's Report on AIDS*." In their article, they show how the members of the Reagan administration refused to address public concerns over AIDS until well into the epidemic. When C. Everett Koop, the Surgeon General during Regan's administration, published the *Surgeon*

5 Downs, *Stand By Me,* 56.

6 James Darsey, "From 'Gay Is Good' to the Scourge of AIDS: The Evolution of Gay Liberation Rhetoric, 1977-1990," *Communication Studies* 42, no. 1 (Spring 1991), 48.

7 Darsey, "From 'Gay Is Good'", 50.

8 Seth Dowland, "'Family Values' and the Formation of a Christian Right Agenda," *Church History* 78, no. 3 (Sept. 2009): 606-631.

General's Report on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome in 1986, Reagan maintained his silence on an increasingly concerning public health issue. It was not until April 1987, nearly ten years after the first reports of AIDS, that "there was even a publicly offered metaphor of a 'war on AIDS.'"[9] In the article "Sounding Board: AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Public Health," Robert M. Wachter examined AIDS activism and its effects on public health. He argued that groups like ACT UP owed their successes to radical and controversial action, a departure from pacifist forms of social engagement.[10] Activists were able to use a combination of intelligence and intimidation to manipulate existing structures into working for their maximum benefit exposing the necessity for AIDS resources. Because articulate and media-literate activists joined the ranks of these organizations, AIDS activists were able to make better use of the little access they could muster to policymakers, scientists, and doctors.[11]

An often-conflicting narrative emerged from the scholarship on AIDS demonstrations because of the large number of activist groups and protests. Sarah Schulman, former ACT UP New York member, drew attention to this in her book *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993*. The purpose of this compilation was partly to record a history of activism very nearly lost along with an entire generation of LGBT people. However, it was also because newspapers and journals like *The New York Times*, which she referred to as "*The New York Crimes*," often inaccurately and minimally reported on the epidemic; there were the same news reports quoted by professional academic research.[12]

Anita Bryant and Unifying Homophobia

Despite the existence of a Gay and Lesbian movement for at least two decades, it was not until the Stonewall Riots of 1969 that the Gay Liberation movement began to mature.[13] Groups like the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis had done some work for Gay Liberation, but it was in the 1970s that a more public and organized queer community emerged. The first yearly commemoration of the Stonewall Riots in New York City became

9 Tina L. Perez and George N. Dionisopoulos, "Presidential Silence, C. Everett Koop, and The Surgeon General's Report on AIDS," *Communication Studies* 46, no. 1-2 (July 1995), 21.

10 Robert M. Wachter, "Sounding Board: AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Public Health," *The New England Journal of Medicine* (January 1992), 128.

11 Wachter, "Sounding Board", 129.

12 Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, xv.

13 It should be noted that during this time the gay liberation movement was focused only on gay men and lesbians. It would not be until later that other sexualities would be included in liberation rhetoric.

known as Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade. The celebration drew the attendance of thousands of people.[14] In subsequent years, LGBT people attempted to make further inroads into sectors of society that had previously been closed to them, including the Christian church. By the late 1970s, many LGBT people sought full recognition and acceptance by members of their respective churches.[15] The push for religious inclusion and gay rights contributed to the emergence of songwriter and former beauty queen Anita Bryant as a voice against the Gay Liberation movement.

Bryant's first public demonstration against the LGBT community happened in Dade County, Miami, in 1977. She was vocally opposed to a passed ordinance that prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation. At first, her support came from locals residing in Dade County. Soon, she was supported by other Southern Christian fundamentalists and thus began the first national crusade against homosexuality.[16] Her "Save Our Children" campaign aided in constructing a narrative that homosexuals were sinners and child molesters. During her campaign, she declared, "As a mother, I know that homosexuals cannot biologically reproduce children; therefore, they must recruit our children."[17] This statement illustrated the fear-driven nature of her campaign. The campaign never provided evidence that homosexuals were more prone to child molestation than their heterosexual counterparts and Bryant's quote itself was ambiguous in meaning. However, Bryant's campaign appealed to concerned Christian parents among other community members. As a result, she succeeded in repealing the Dade County ordinance.

It is necessary to examine the legacy of Bryant's crusade because it unleashed in its wake more vocal and harmful rhetoric from other influential sectors of the public. One year later, in 1978, senator John Briggs from Orange County, California, sponsored California Proposition 6, a ballot initiative that sought to ban gay men and lesbians from working in California public schools.[18] The Briggs Initiative, as it was called, was defeated, but it, along with Bryant's efforts, pointed to a broader trend in anti-gay movements, as evidenced by headlines from gay newspapers at the time. *The Philadelphia Gay News* published an editorial with the headline "Bryant Threatens All GAYS!" and a warning that Florida gays must be helped "otherwise Anita Bryant and

14 David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin, 2011), 255.

15 Downs, *Stand by Me*, 45.

16 Downs, *Stand by Me*, 56.

17 The Daily Dish, "Falwell and Mohler," *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, July 18, 2013. Accessed October 28, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/daily-dish/archive/2007/05/falwell-and-mohler/228497/.

18 Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York, NY: St Martin's Griffin, 1987), 16.

friends might show up in your town."[19] This warning proved to be particularly poignant in the upcoming years.

The Moral Majority

Resistance to the bias attacks on the LGBT community coupled with Bryant political stunts rendered her activism as ridicule performances. She eventually fell out of public favor. Through a series of boycotts and protests organized against Bryant, including a well-reported pie thrown in her face during a national broadcast, LGBT people managed to create enough controversy that she was dropped by her sponsors and from the public eye.[20] However, her rhetoric lived on and found itself new hosts in evangelical ministers like Francis Schaeffer and Jerry Falwell, Sr. It is interesting to note that before 1975, evangelicals had little influence in the public sphere. In fact, evangelicals often spoke in favor of feminist causes like the Equal Rights Amendment (E.R.A.).[21] It was not until the landmark Supreme Court decision on *Roe v Wade* that Christian fundamentalists like Shaeffer and Falwell Sr. emerged as gatekeepers of moral values. Before *Roe v Wade*, the religious right had maintained a policy of separation when it came to politics, considering it a dirty business, but by the 1980s, they represented a powerful voting bloc.[22]

The reason for this drastic shift lay partly with Shaeffer, who became the first evangelical to preach about the dangers of a so-called "culture war."[23] Like Bryant's "Save Our Children" campaign, this war was fabricated to stall progressive movements and return the United States to a more conservative period and morality. In a review of Schaeffer's book *A Christian Manifesto*, reviewer Mark McCulley wrote that Shaeffer clearly stated his desire for separation of church and state, but "what [was] left unspoken here, however, [was] that like [John] Calvin, Shaeffer *does* want 'Christian-state.' Like [John] Knox, he [*did*] want rulers to rule by 'God's law.'"[24] Shaeffer was not alone in his determination to legislate morality, and his theories attracted several followers, including Falwell, Sr.

Falwell, Sr. was one of the first to adopt Shaeffer's theory of "co-belligerency," which stated that the most effective political tactic was to find a

19 Darsey, "From 'Gay Is Good'", 48.

20 Tyler Austin, "Today in Gay History: Gay Activist Pies Anita Bryant in the Face," *OUT Magazine*. Out Magazine, October 14, 2018. Accessed, November 12, 2021, https://www.out.com/today-gay-history/2016/10/14/today-gay-history-gay-activist-pies-anita-bryant-face.

21 Dowland, "'Family Values'", 607.

22 Dowland, "'Family Values'", 613.

23 Dowland, "'Family Values'", 613.

24 Mark McCulley, "Book Review," *Journal of Church and State 25*, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 354-56.

common cause with non-evangelicals in order to achieve their political aims.[25] To this end, Falwell Sr. formed the Moral Majority, a political action group that described itself in an early brochure as "pro-life, pro-family, pro-moral, and pro-America."[26] Falwell's hard and fast opposition to feminism, abortion, and gay rights won conservative Protestant favor with groups that had historical animosity with them, including Catholics; this support later proved crucial to Falwell, Sr.'s political activism in part because the Moral Majority was to some degree unpopular outside of fundamentalist Christian circles.[27]

Although many did not fully embrace the Moral Majority, its rhetoric found a firm footing in the American consciousness. Building on the previous work of Bryant and Shaeffer, Falwell Sr. dedicated himself to fighting what he saw as America's moral decline. In *The Moral Majority Report*, he wrote, "if America is to return to original greatness, we must…support the traditional monogamous family as the only acceptable form."[28] As Falwell began to move into political circles, his and Shaeffer's defense of the family rhetoric became more popular with candidates in all branches of the government endorsed by the group. Some of these candidates included senator Jesse Helms and former president Jimmy Carter, who eventually fell out of favor with the conservative groups, and President Ronald Reagan.

Ronald Reagan, AIDS, and Governmental Neglect

The rise of Anita Bryant and the Moral Majority was significant because, though Ronald Reagan was not openly a supporter of either, much of his policy and rhetoric aligned with the Christian fundamentalist focus on traditional family values. In addition, he hired a former executive director of the Moral Majority as a staff member during his campaign.[29] While governor of California, Reagan referred to gay people as "sick unfortunates" and blocked the repeal of state sodomy laws explicitly known for targeting the civil rights of gay men.[30] Reagan's homophobia emerged shortly into his presidential term, and it had disastrous consequences for the gay community during the beginning of the AIDS epidemic.

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25 Dowland, "'Family Values'", 613.

26 "Your Invitation to Join the Moral Majority," *Your Invitation to Join the Moral Majority*. Accessed October 30 2021, https://liberty.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p17184coll1/id/21.

27 Clyde Wilcox, "Popular Support for the Moral Majority in 1980: A Second Look," *Social Science Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (1987): 157-66.

28 Jerry Falwell, "America Was Built on Seven Great Principles," *The Moral Majority Report*, May 18, 1981, 3.

29 Charles Milton "Chuck" Patrick, ed., *TWT*, October 24, 1980, 10.

30 Patrick, *TWT*, 9.

The first cases of AIDS in the United States coincided with the beginning of Reagan's first presidential term. The early years of the AIDS crisis were full of confusion, lack of scientific information, and uncertainty. The virus that caused AIDS had yet to be unidentified, and people only knew that it seemed only to infect gay men. As it became more apparent that cases were rising rapidly and people were dying, Reagan maintained a policy of silence on the epidemic, echoed by the rest of the government and the media. Randy Shilts's *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*, commented on the silent stand taken by the administration during a 1983 hearing before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services. Shilts asserted that committee members who testified that AIDS research needed less funding "were treading one step shy of perjury."[31] Dr. William Foege, then director of the C.D.C., testified that funds were unnecessary but just six days previously had privately written that "the C.D.C. 'clearly' needed more money."[32] These statements were indicative of the ongoing issue of AIDS funding caught between an emerging public health crisis and everyday politics. It was clear that funding was needed but administrators were unwilling to publicly admit it.

The lack of funding was only one part of a broader problem. Doctors could not publicly discuss the success or failure of their experimental treatments because medical journals refused to publish their studies if any of its content was brought to the public's attention before publishing.[33] Hospital policies remained unaltered despite the harm they caused to P.W.A.s. Sloan-Kettering, a cancer hospital in New York, had a policy that only one dermatological patient could be admitted per week. Such policies were detrimental to AIDS patients considering that one of the most common opportunistic infections affecting P.W.A.s was a rare skin cancer called Kaposi's sarcoma.[34] By October of 1983, the C.D.C. had recorded 2,640 AIDS cases. Of that number, 1,092 had died, yet, Reagan had still not mentioned the epidemic or enacted any policy regarding its spread.[35] In fact, C. Everett Koop, the Surgeon General, had been specifically banned from speaking publicly on AIDS and was "completely cut off from AIDS."[36] In 1986, Koop released *The Surgeon General's Report on AIDS* without clearance from the White House because, as he stated:

> I knew that telling the truth about AIDS, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth would not be well received in

31 Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, 294.
32 Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, 293.
33 Larry Kramer, "1,112 and Counting" *The New York Native*, March 14, 1983, 181.
34 Kramer, "1,112 and Counting", 181.
35 Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, 382.
36 Perez and Dionisopoulos, "Presidential Silence", 21.

> some places. One of those places would be the White House, at least in those offices where ideology would be the main concern…A large portion of the president's constituency was anti-homosexual, anti-drug abuse, anti-promiscuity, and anti-sex education; these people would not respond well to some of the things that would have to be said in a health report about AIDS.[37]

Koop's report contained a detailed record of all the information about AIDS and AIDS prevention at that time. *The Surgeon General's Report* was too little too late. This was particularly true for LGBT people who had succumbed to the disease or had been suffering for years. Reagan remained silent. He did not publicly mention AIDS until 1987; this fact was not lost on the LGBT activists who had long since decided to take matters into their own hands.[38]

AIDS Activism

AIDS activism began slowly. During the confusing early years, many activists were unaware or lacked the information to efficiently organize their efforts to assist in the fight against AIDS. However, once it became clear that AIDS was a severe disease affecting a marginalized community, it became necessary for P.W.A.s and their allies to ignite modes for self-advocacy. By 1987 nearly 20,000 people had died of AIDS, and three-fourths were gay.[39] With the evidence of their mortality mounting, LGBT people had little choice but to begin a campaign demanding the care and treatment they desperately required.

AIDS activism was effective partly because its focus was not solely on one aspect of living with AIDS. Dr. Robert M. Wachter stated, "The activists' unprecedented modus operandi [was] a study in contrasts: street theatre and intimidation on the one hand, detailed position papers and painstaking negotiation on the other. The effect has been to energize the fight against AIDS with an urgency that has translated into expedited drug approvals, lower prices for medications, and increased funding for AIDS research and care."[40] AIDS groups like ACTUP attracted numerous members who were able to use their expertise or creativity to effect change for those struggling with the illness. ACTUP activists spent time and money attempting to spread AIDS awareness with campaigns like "Kissing Doesn't Kill." The New York-based campaign included a series of posters informing the public that AIDS was not transmitted through saliva.[41]

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37 C. Everett Koop, *Koop: The Memoirs of America's Family Doctor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1992), 204.

38 Perez and Dionisopoulos, "Presidential Silence", 21.

39 Wachter, "Sounding Board", 128.

40 Wachter, "Sounding Board", 128.

41 Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 45.

More poignant movements were borne from the desperation many LGBT people felt in the face of an almost inevitable death from AIDS. Activists also deployed "Die-ins" where protesters lay on the ground silently to represent those lives already lost to the disease. The demonstrations frequently occurred at places like the C.D.C. and the National Institute of Health (N.I.H.).[42] The most famous demonstration representing the many Americans lost to AIDS was the AIDS Quilt displayed on the National Mall in Washington, DC, in October of 1987. Conceived by gay rights activist Cleve Jones, the quilt included 1,920 panels and covered a space larger than a football field.[43] Another lasting image from AIDS protests was captured in a simple photo of activist David Wojnarowicz with the words, in all capital letters, emblazoned on his back: "IF I DIE OF AIDS – FORGET BURIAL – JUST DROP MY BODY ON THE STEPS OF THE F.D.A."[44] Wojnarowicz passed away from complications with AIDS in 1992.

The Legacy of the AIDS Crisis

As of 2021, an estimated 36.3 million people worldwide have died from AIDS-related illnesses since the beginning of the epidemic.[45] New treatments have decreased mortality rates significantly, and it is now possible to live an expected lifespan with treatment. However, by the time science had caught up with the fast-acting disease, millions had already died. Because AIDS primarily affected marginalized communities, funding was limited, so research was slow. Anita Bryant, Moral Majority, and their supporters did nothing to improve the desire for increased funding and more rapid research. In fact, their hate-fueled rhetoric directly contributed to the exacerbation of both these issues. It is impossible to know how many more lives could have been saved with a faster response by the government, and it is plausible that an effective treatment could have been found years earlier with more funding.

The legacy of the AIDS crisis encompassed both tragedy and triumph. It remains a stain on the Reagan administration, but more importantly, it is an impactful moment in LGBT history. A community united in desperation and anger with its elected officials decided to take matters into its own hands and recasts its political relationship while drafting how to confront treatment for

42 Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 32.

43 "The History of the Quilt," National Aids Memorial. Accessed December 10, 2021, https://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt-history.

44 Olivia Laing, "David Wojnarowicz: Still Fighting Prejudice 24 Years After His Death," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, May 12, 2016), https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/13/david-wojnarowicz-close-to-the-knives-a-memoir-of-disintegration-artist-aids-activist.

45 "Global HIV & AIDS Statistics - Fact Sheet," *UNAIDS*, 2021. Accessed, November 12, 2021, https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet.

future infectious diseases. Organizations like ACTUP are still active in the fight against AIDS and continue to organize in the hopes that one day, AIDS itself will be a distant memory. The contributions of those whose lives were given in the fight will continue to be remembered in the emblem "Act up. Fight back. Fight AIDS."[46]

46 ACTUP Slogan. https://actupny.org/index.html.