

The Gipper's Last Gasp

Even in death,
Ronald Reagan
continues his reign
as the Teflon President.

Just Out presents the truth
• about his abysmal record
on AIDS.

by Rex Wockner and Meg Daly



When Ronald Reagan breathed his last breath June 5, he left behind a nation greatly affected by the force of his words, deeds and nondeeds.

An outpouring of patriotic platitudes have blanketed the land, with President Bush leading the way by declaring June 11 a National Day of Mourning for the 40th commander in chief. Federal buildings are to fly the U.S. flag at half-staff until July 4.

The sentiment quickly swept westward. Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski declared June 11 as Ronald Reagan Commemoration Day and encouraged "all Oregonians to join in this observance" by remembering Reagan's "unparalleled ability to reach out to the American people and [convey] his unbounded optimism about the future of the United States to the American people."

Which American people, many queers would ask.

Meanwhile, another blanket continued to stretch across the country. The AIDS Memorial Quilt—unruffled by the weepy Reagan commemorations—will be displayed from June 25 to 27 in Washington, D.C., in observance of National HIV Testing Day. More than 44,000 panels strong, the quilt pays tribute to the tens of thousands of lives lost to AIDS in the

United States and serves as a powerful reminder that AIDS is not over. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that, to date, 21.8 million people worldwide have died of the pandemic.

It is no small irony that the U.S. flag will be flying at half-staff during the quilt weekend. About 30,000 U.S. citizens had died of the disease before Reagan publicly addressed it in a 1987 speech. The lowered flag will look mournfully down on the mourners, signifying quite a different loss.

As Barbra Streisand put it in her 1992 address to an AIDS Project Los Angeles fund-raiser: "I will never forgive my fellow actor Ronald Reagan for his genocidal denial of the illness's existence, for his refusal to even utter the word AIDS for seven years and for blocking adequate funding for research and education which could have saved hundreds of thousands of lives."

Gay actor Harvey Fierstein was even more blunt in a confrontation with radio talk show host Michael Reagan on the May 20, 1997, episode of *Politically Incorrect*. When the topic turned to the former president's handling of AIDS, he shouted, "Fuck you and fuck your father."