

On Aug. 2, 1988, Reagan prohibited federal agencies from discriminating against employees infected with HIV but refused to seek a law banning such discrimination nationwide, as recommended by his AIDS commission. U.S. Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., commented: "The Reagan administration has done its best to avoid making even a single helpful AIDS decision in the eight years of the Reagan presidency. They handpick a commission and then don't even have the courage to accept its recommendations."

Perhaps this was true because Reagan and Co. saw AIDS as a laughing matter. The transcript of an Oct. 15, 1982, briefing with press secretary Larry Speakes reveals the Reagan administration's dismissal of the "gay plague":

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

"Answer: What's AIDS?"

"Q: Over a third of them have died. It's known as 'gay plague.' [Laughter.] No, it is. I mean it's a pretty serious thing that one in every three people that get this have died. And I wondered if the president is aware of it?"

"A: I don't have it. Do you? [Laughter.]

"Q: No, I don't."

"A: You didn't answer my question."

"Q: Well, I just wondered, does the president—"

"A: How do you know? [Laughter.]

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

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## A Letter to My Best Friend



Matt Foreman

On June 11, while Bush-obeying federal employees stayed home from work and flocked to their "respective places of worship" to pay homage to President Ronald Reagan, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force closed its offices "in memory of all those we have lost to AIDS." Executive director Matt Foreman marked the occasion by writing this letter to his best friend, Steven Powsner, who served as president of the New York City Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center from 1992 to 1994. He died of AIDS complications Nov. 20, 1995, at age 40.

DEAR STEVEN:

I so much wish you were here today to tell me what to do. You would know if it's right to comment on the death of former President Reagan, or if I should just let pass the endless paeans to his greatness. But you're not here. The policies of the Reagan administration saw to that.

Yes, Steven, I do feel for the family and friends of the former president. The death of a loved one is always a profoundly sad occasion, and Mr. Reagan was loved by many. I have tremendous empathy and respect for Mrs. Reagan, who lovingly cared for him through excruciating years of Alzheimer's.

Sorry, Steven, but even on this day I'm not able to set aside the shaking anger I feel over Reagan's nonresponse to the AIDS epidemic or for the continuing anti-gay legacy of his administration. Is it personal? Of course. AIDS was first reported in 1981, but President Reagan could not bring himself to address the plague until March 31, 1987, at which time there were

60,000 reported cases of full-blown AIDS and 30,000 deaths. I remember that day, Steven—you were staying round-the-clock in Memorial Sloan Kettering Hospital caring for your dying partner of over 15

years, Bruce Cooper. It was another 41 days of utter agony for both of you before Bruce died. During those years of White House silence and inaction, how many other dear friends did we see sicken and die hideous deaths?

Is it personal? Yes, Steven. I know for a fact that you would be alive today if the Reagan administration had mounted even a tepid response to the epidemic. If protease inhibitors been available in July of 1995 instead of December, you'd still be here.

I wouldn't feel so angry if the Reagan administration's failing was due to ignorance or bureaucratic ineptitude. No, Steven, we knew then it was deliberate. The government's response was dictated by the grip of evangelical Christian conservatives who saw gay people as sinners and AIDS as God's well-deserved punishment. Remember? The White House director of communications, Patrick Buchanan, once argued in print that AIDS is nature's revenge on gay men. Reagan's secretary of education, William Bennett, and his domestic policy adviser, Gary

Bauer, made sure that science (and basic tenets of Christianity, for that matter) never got in the way of politics or what they saw as "God's" work.

Even so, I think I could let go of this anger if this was just another overwhelmingly sad chapter in our nation's past. It is not, Steven, can you believe that the unholy pact President Reagan and the Republican Party entered with the forces of religious intolerance have not weakened, but grown exponentially stronger? Can you believe that the U.S. government is still bowing to right-wing extremists and fighting condom distribution and explicit HIV education, even while AIDS is killing millions across the world? Or that "devout" Christians have forced the scrapping of AIDS prevention programs targeted at HIV-negative gay and bisexual men in favor of bullshit "abstinence only until marriage" initiatives? Or the shameless duplicity of these same forces seeking to forever outlaw even the hope of marriage for gay people? Or that Reagan stalwarts like Buchanan, Bennett and Bauer are still grinding their homophobic axes?

No, Steven, I do not presume to judge Ronald Reagan's soul or heart. He may very well have been a nice guy. In fact, I don't think that Reagan hated gay people—I'm sure some of his and Nancy's best friends were gay. But I do know that the Reagan administration's policies on AIDS and anything gay-related resulted—and continue to result—in despair and death.

Oh, Steven, how much I wish so much you were here.

MATT

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