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"A: No, I don't know anything about it, Lester.

"Q: Does the president, does anyone in the White House know about this epidemic, Larry?"

"A: I don't think so...."

When finally forced to break its silence about the reality of AIDS, Reagan's GOP amped up the homophobic hysteria. During the 1988 Republican National Convention in New Orleans, a crowd listening to a speech by the outgoing president turned on a group of 15 protesters from the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. Five ACT UP members were arrested in the ensuing melee. All 15 of the protesters were punched and kicked by the angry mob.

"If we had stayed there one minute longer, we would have been killed," ACT UP's Neil Broome said. "These people were rabid.... They wanted to beat the living shit out of us. In all my time with ACT UP, I've never seen anything like this."

The fight broke out as Reagan addressed thousands of convention delegates and other supporters during official opening ceremonies. All three major TV networks and CNN carried the outbreak live.

"All we were doing was standing there with our AIDSGATE signs," ACT UP's Heidi Dorow said. "Suddenly this group of young men in suits started shouting things like, 'Let's

get the faggots' and 'Queers go home.' We responded by chanting, 'History will recall, Reagan and Bush did nothing at all.'"

ACT UP's Frank Smithson added: "At that point, the crowd became really ugly. They started grabbing our signs and ripping them up and then punching us."

The activists attempted to retreat but were surrounded by hundreds of Republicans. "They

had the most intense looks of hatred," Broome said. "They were calling us commies, faggots and queers. At one point, several of them began chanting, 'You deserve to die.' I was literally afraid for my life."

To be fair, Reagan eventually spoke up about AIDS—but he waited until he was safely out of the White House to do so. In 1990

he made a public service announcement for the Pediatric AIDS Foundation saying: "We can all grow and learn in our lives, and I've learned all kinds of people can get AIDS, even children.... I'm not asking you to send money. I'm asking for something more important: your understanding. Maybe it's time we all learned something new."

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ACT UP protesters demonstrate at the 1988 Republican National Convention in New Orleans

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