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Reagan's AIDS Legacy: Silence Equals Death

by Allen White

In death, many define Ronald Reagan as a great U.S. president. Any claim to greatness, however, evaporates when balanced with his shameful abdication of leadership in the fight against AIDS. Americans must never allow history to minimize this president's lack of action, which ultimately resulted in the death of millions from AIDS.

After discovery of the first cases in 1981, it soon became clear a national health crisis was developing. But Reagan's response was "halting and ineffective," according to his biographer, Lou Cannon. Those infected initially with this mysterious disease—all gay men—found themselves targeted with an unprecedented level of mean-spirited hostility.

A significant source of Reagan's support came from the newly identified religious right and the Moral Majority, a political action group founded by the Rev. Jerry Falwell. AIDS became the tool, and gay men the target, for the politics of fear, hate and discrimination. Falwell said, "AIDS is the wrath of God upon homosexuals." Reagan communications director Pat Buchanan argued that AIDS is "nature's revenge on gay men."

With each passing month, death and suffering increased at a frightening rate. Scientists, researchers and health care professionals at every level expressed the need for funding. The response of the Reagan administration was indifference.

By Feb. 1, 1983, 1,025 AIDS cases were reported, and at least 394 had died in the United States. Reagan said nothing. On April 23, 1984, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced 4,177 reported cases in the United States and 1,807 deaths. In San Francisco, the health department reported more than 500 cases. Again, Reagan said nothing.

That same year, the Democratic National Convention convened in San Francisco. Hoping to focus attention on the need for AIDS research, education and treatment, more than 100,000 sympathizers marched from the Castro to Moscone Center.

With each diagnosis, the pain and suffering spread across the United States. Everyone

seemed to now know someone infected with AIDS. At a White House state dinner, first lady Nancy Reagan expressed concern for a guest showing signs of significant weight loss. On July 25, 1985, the American Hospital in Paris announced that Rock Hudson had AIDS.

With AIDS finally out of the closet, activists such as Paul Boneberg, who in 1984 started Mobilization Against AIDS in San Francisco, begged Reagan to say something now that he, like thousands of others, knew a person with AIDS. Writing in *The Washington Post* in late 1985, U.S. Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., stated: "It is surprising that the president could remain silent as 6,000 Americans died, that he could fail to acknowledge the epidemic's existence. Perhaps his staff felt he had to, since many of his New Right supporters have raised money by campaigning against homosexuals."

Reagan would ultimately address the issue of AIDS while president. His remarks came near the end of his second term May 31, 1987, at the third International Conference on AIDS in Washington, D.C. When he spoke, 36,058 U.S. citizens had been diagnosed with AIDS and 20,849 had died. The disease had spread to 113 countries, with more than 50,000 cases.

With information available at the start of 2004, the World Health Organization placed the total number of people living with HIV throughout the world at more than 40 million. It estimates 5 million were newly infected in 2003 and places the total number of deaths for the one year from AIDS at 3 million. Trends indicate 2004 totals, when tabulated, will be substantially higher.

Reagan could have chosen to end the homophobic rhetoric that flowed from so many in his administration. C. Everett Koop, the president's surgeon general, has said that because of "intradepartmental politics" he was cut out of all AIDS discussions for the first five years of the administration. The reason, he explained, was "because transmission of AIDS was understood to be primarily in the homosexual population and in those who abused intravenous drugs." Koop said the president's advisers "took the stand, 'They are only getting what they justly deserve.'"

How profoundly different might have been the outcome if his leadership had generated compassion rather than hostility. Ronald Reagan left a legacy of silence. Should he have had the courage to speak out then, today so many children, so many adults might still be alive.



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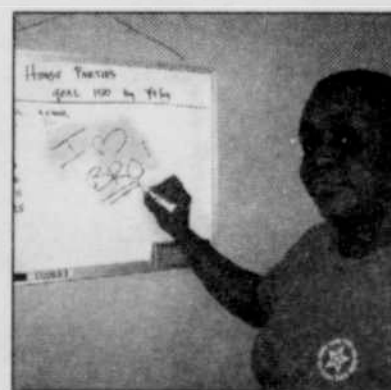
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