

Reagan, Religion, and the Rise of AIDS

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Ronald Reagan was a witty and personable Republican politician and a compelling public speaker, which drew the attention of a burgeoning constituency that mixed social, economic, and religious conservatism. This new Religious Right – a coalition sharing conservative political and religious ideals – supported Reagan en masse, turning out in large numbers to vote for him. This meant they had power in America, both in that the president agreed with many of their stances and that they helped put him in that role in the first place. This rising power was not always to the benefit of all Americans, especially those the Religious Right condemned. The timing of this rise was unfortunate, as the AIDS crisis required strong leadership in both voice and money. President Ronald Reagan embodied the values of the Religious Right voting bloc, which inhibited his response to the AIDS crisis and led to the death of many Americans.

To understand the Religious Right in the 1980s, one must look further back in American history. Prior to the rise of this movement, most American voters considered it taboo to explicitly combine politics and religion. However, the 1960s changed a great deal about American life. Civil rights legislation passed, the Vietnam War and protests against it were underway, and the birth control pill, among other social changes, allowed for the advent of the sexual revolution. These societal upheavals and changes caused concern among many conservatives. Conservative activists including Paul Weyrich, Richard Viguerie, and Howard Phillips

and televangelists Jerry Falwell and Billy Graham took advantage of this conflict to build a coalition that would have power as a political voting bloc. Throughout the 1970s, small-government conservatives and evangelical religious leaders found common ground and made connections, seeking out ways to draw themselves closer in the minds of constituents and parishioners. A prime example of this is the case of Bob Jones University. In 1970, the IRS decreed that an organization practicing segregation was by definition not charitable and therefore ineligible for charitable tax-exempt status. Bob Jones University, a religious institution, practiced segregation. Small-business conservatives felt that this was gross government overreach on the part of the IRS. Evangelicals understood this to be an attack on their faith. Paul Weyrich attributes this action on the part of the IRS one of the key factors that drew these two movements together by providing a rallying point that was relevant to both political and religious conservatives.¹

Each side of this newfound coalition benefited significantly from their growing bond. Religious conservatives gained respectability and access to mainstream political processes that would otherwise be difficult for them to achieve. Political conservatives got fervently devoted voters who had emotional and moral reasons to make it to the polls.² These voters, while skewing older initially, also had television shows, schools, universities, and churches that allowed their message to be spread to younger people in the future, ensuring that they could

maintain a population large enough to stay relevant.³ The primary focus of this coalition was where their interests most strongly overlapped: domestic social issues like abortion rights, homosexuality, and prayer in school, paired with less government oversight and regulation that gave businesses and churches alike more leeway to do as they preferred. These issues collectively were referred to as “family values” and they provided a common rallying point based on a shared notion of morality and decency.⁴

Reagan might have been seen as a poor fit to receive the support of such a movement. A former actor in his second marriage, Reagan was running against former Sunday School teacher and fellow evangelical Christian Jimmy Carter. Reagan further had a gubernatorial history of passing laws that ran counter to the Religious Right message, such as the 1967 law sponsored by Democratic representative Anthony Beilenson, which expanded abortion rights in California in cases involving rape, incest, or health concerns.⁵ However, the Religious Right saw something in him and his past. For example, Reagan was president of the Screen Actors’ Guild, the Hollywood union for actors, during the 1940s. He was called to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, where he made a positive impression as a clean-cut and reasonable anti-Communist.⁶

Beginning in 1953, Reagan worked with the General Electric Theater, a program sponsored by the General Electric Company to build positive relationships with customers and workers. This was an instrumental time for him to become a conservative face to the public, not only on the weekly Sunday evening program but when he “visited the plants and walked the factory floors”, meeting workers personally as he “articulated the values of personal liberty and individual responsibility.”⁷ Then in 1964, Reagan was asked to give a speech for Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. Reagan’s speech, “A Time for Choosing” gave the audience “something to cheer about” with its optimistic message for the future and launched him into the political sphere.⁸ Reagan’s political reputation continued during his time as governor, where he remained an engaging speaker with his finger on the popular conservative pulse. For example, he condemned student protestors at

California universities, saying “[it] does not constitute political interference with intellectual freedom for the tax-paying citizens, who support the college and university systems, to ask that, in addition to teaching, they build character on accepted moral and ethical standards.”⁹ Reagan knew the talking points that established him as a steady leader on the political right.

However, the primary reason the Religious Right was drawn to Ronald Reagan was that he talked the evangelical talk. According to historian Darren Dochuk, “Reagan used language drawn from the evangelical lexicon.” During his campaign for governor of California, Reagan was open about his conversion experience as a born-again Christian. He specifically said he “accepted the Lord as [his] personal savior,” echoing the phrasing of popular evangelical Christian leaders like Billy Graham. When discussing in an interview how he intended to govern California, he mentioned he could not “conceive of anyone trying to meet the problems we face today without help from God.”¹⁰ Reagan knew how to appeal to evangelicals using their own words. Ronald Reagan also had warm personal friendships with evangelical religious leaders such as Pat Boone, Jerry Falwell Sr., and Billy Graham that dated back to his early time in office as governor.¹¹ Further, the type of economic plan Reagan favored – small government and supply-side economics – made religious and economic conservatives feel confident that they would have the freedom to craft local policy to suit them. In the end, the reason the Religious Right supported Reagan was because he publicly supported them as he rose first to Governor of California and then to President of the United States in 1980.

While all this was happening, another major change was quietly affecting the world and eventually American life. This was the disease now known as human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome or HIV/AIDS. HIV evolved from simian immunodeficiency virus, which affects monkeys and chimpanzees, and likely jumped to humans as a result of hunting for bushmeat. The first recorded case of HIV in a human dates back to samples taken from a man who died in 1959 in Central Africa.¹² Through the 1960s and 70s, several cases of AIDS emerged in Europeans who had spent time in Africa. The first known cases of AIDS in the western hemisphere were a series of 12 cases of Kaposi’s

sarcoma, “a rare skin cancer usually found in older Eastern European men.” This was found in Haiti between 1979 and 1981.¹³ While AIDS likely had come to the Americas a few times, it petered out because there were not enough opportunities for it to spread through human populations.¹⁴ America would not get so lucky again.

1981 was when AIDS started to be seen and recognized by medical professionals in the United States. In Los Angeles, California, five men who were “active homosexuals... were treated for biopsy-confirmed *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia,” a rare disease related to strong immunosuppression. This was significant enough to alert the Centers for Disease Control, or CDC, who published the information in the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)* in June 1981. The report concluded that there was “an association between some aspect of a homosexual lifestyle or disease acquired through sexual contact and *Pneumocystis* pneumonia in this population.”¹⁵ Indeed, due to the relative fragility of rectal tissues and the viral load in seminal fluid, penetrative anal sex was an easy way to spread HIV, which then attacked helper-T immune system cells, allowing the body to be compromised by opportunistic diseases. The long incubation period where HIV was not displaying symptoms in the people who had it allowed it to spread undetected. The gay community in Los Angeles had been infected. As the MMWR mentions, none of the reported infected knew each other or had any “common contacts.” By this point, the disease had spread too far to be stopped. Moreover, there were other cases cropping up in other American cities like San Francisco, New York City, and Atlanta, especially in gay communities.¹⁷ In the beginning of the 1980s, scientists and doctors were seeing the beginning of a pandemic like nothing they had ever seen before. According to Dr. Anthony Fauci, it was “truly a new disease.”¹⁸

While many of the early victims of AIDS were gay men, other communities were also particularly at risk. AIDS spread via blood in addition to sexual contact, meaning that other affected communities included intravenous drug users who reused or shared needles and hemophiliacs who required blood-based clotting products to live. Babies of infected individuals could contract HIV in utero or during birth. And of course, sexual contact did not have to be between men to spread HIV.¹⁹ However, the early infection of gay

men at a time when their personal and sexual liberation was already controversial meant that the entire disease was strongly associated with homosexuality. Much of the American public saw AIDS victims as dirty, dangerous, and morally impure by association, no matter how they contracted the disease. For example, Jerry Falwell is quoted as saying, “AIDS is a lethal judgement of God on America for endorsing this vulgar, perverted, and reprobate lifestyle” and “[w]e cannot continue to allow our leaders to pass laws protecting the homosexual lifestyle,” referring to both civil rights for queer people in general and measures to protect them from AIDS in particular.²⁰

Among the clamor from religious organizations and the general public as a whole, President Reagan’s voice stood in stark contrast. That is, Reagan was notably silent on the issue of the growing AIDS crisis. He did not even utter the word “AIDS” in public until 1987, though federal health departments like the CDC and Department of Health and Human Services were actively involved in working to resolve the emergency. Health officials and AIDS activists both believe that this silence contributed to negative public reaction and stigma surrounding the crisis. Reagan could have directed funding efforts from the federal government or provided a calm voice to cool the vitriol against victims of AIDS, for example. However, Dr. Donald Francis, an epidemiologist who worked for the CDC researching the disease during the crisis, says of the Reagan administration, “their simple-minded approach had no room for complex concerns like AIDS.” Dr. Francis was perturbed that an administration ostensibly “for the people” was allowing many of those people to die due to lack of concern from the government.²¹ Dr. Jim Curran, a researcher with the CDC’s Sexually Transmitted Disease division called Reagan’s lack of response “an open neglect” and a “failure” on the part of Reagan and his administration, referring both to Reagan’s unwillingness to discuss the crisis and general defunding of health and human services in general, which continued through his entire administration.²² Larry Kramer, a playwright and AIDS activist involved in grassroots movements like Gay Mens’ Health Crisis and ACT UP, went so far as to call him “Adolf Reagan” as he believed Reagan “responsible for the death of more gay people than anybody in the world.”²³

It was not only a matter of not knowing AIDS existed or its effects. In a telegram from 1982, early in

Reagan's first term, the Department of State to the Embassy in Haiti advised Americans in Haiti to "avoid promiscuous sexual behavior, illegal IV drug use and to use blood or blood products only in a lifesaving situation." Though at the time it was considered a "rare disease", it was still considered risky enough to avoid.²⁴ The CDC was also working hard on programs to reduce risky behaviors related to AIDS. By 1985, the CDC was reasonably certain of how exactly HIV was spreading, and so created a plan to stop it. The plan was to reduce HIV transmission in urban areas by "hiring teams of people, educating at risk populations of urban areas, testing them for antibodies, and counseling them on ways to prevent further spread." This plan would have cost an estimated \$37 million, which Dr. Francis and others at the CDC felt was a considerable but necessary sum to deal with the growing health crisis. This allotment was, however, entirely denied, in such a manner that Dr. Francis and other CDC officials working on AIDS understood to mean "[l]ook pretty and do as little as you can." That is, researchers from the CDC working on the AIDS crisis were to not put too much effort or funding into the work they were doing as it had been deemed low-priority. Indeed, underfunding of HIV/AIDS issues was a common complaint among researchers and activists.²⁵

This perspective on funding was contrasted with the position of Margaret Heckler, Reagan's Secretary of Health and Human Services, who said in a 2006 interview "we could not have gained anything more by increasing the cash expenditures... this was not a problem that money could solve; it was a problem that the scientists could solve."²⁶ It is important to remember that the Religious Right was not only not only concerned with the religious aspect of their name, but that they were not the only conservative faction in Reagan's ear. In addition, "Reagan's key advisors generally tried to insulate the president from religious activists." That's not to say evangelicals were not "enjoying unprecedented access to the presidency and the White House", just that they were not Reagan's only concern.²⁷ 1984 was an election year, and Reagan intended to stay, and to do so meant not making too many waves in the direction of evangelicals and being branded a zealot. Reagan's first priority was to the fiscal conservative notions of small government and supply-side economics that were popular with both the Religious Right and other conservative factions. This extended to how AIDS was

dealt with under the Reagan administration. Members of his administration, Heckler included, supported his fiscal philosophies, driving policy in that direction. Heckler even says that her "first step" and "most serious priority" upon hearing about the advent of AIDS was to talk to the White House Chief of Staff because "this was potentially going to go over the budget." Behind the scenes of the Reagan administration, AIDS was claimed as "the number one issue at the Department of Health and Human Services", but any effort to combat it had to be made within the constraints of the budget-cutting fiscal conservatism Reagan championed, which lay implied as the true top priority.²⁸

In public, Reagan did not make a great deal of effort to address the crisis his subordinates were working on. The first time Reagan even publicly alluded to AIDS was in a press conference in 1985, where he was asked about children with AIDS being allowed to attend public school. Reagan stated that he could "understand both sides of" the issue, despite the fact that AIDS was by that point almost entirely known not to spread through casual contact, as a way of hedging his bets just in case. In responding to the question, he did not even say the word "AIDS."²⁹ His first speech on the subject was not given until almost the end of his administration, in 1987. The speech, given to the American Foundation for AIDS Research, or amFAR, had Reagan touting the successes of his administration, including money spent on research, the advent of the treatment drug AZT, and the possibility of a vaccine very soon. He then went on to soothe some fears about transmission of the disease, firmly stating "AIDS is not a casually contagious disease," and discussed administration plans regarding the disease going forward. One element of the public health response to AIDS as a sexually transmitted disease was sexual education for young people. In his comments on sexual education, Reagan said "if children are taught their own worth, we can expect them to treat themselves and others with greater respect... wherever you have self-respect and mutual respect, you don't have drug abuse and sexual promiscuity, which of course are the two major causes of AIDS". He then went on to say, "after there is a moral base, then you can discuss preventives and other scientific measures." The language used here indicates that Reagan prioritized the imparting of moral norms above accurate information on sexual health. This is reminiscent of the family values of the Religious

Right. Notably, despite being disproportionately affected by the AIDS crisis, gay people were not specifically mentioned in this speech. As such, it's implied that they fall under the umbrella of a "sexual promiscuity" that "self respect and mutual respect" would prevent, which echoes the views espoused by Religious Right leaders like Falwell.³⁰

Reagan used a presidential declaration to declare October 1987 AIDS Awareness and Prevention Month. A great deal of this declaration is the unsurprising brief explanation of what AIDS is, how it is spread, and governmental measures underway to prevent it from spreading forward. However, two paragraphs have language reminiscent of that the Religious Right was saying at around the same time. For example:

The Surgeon General has told all Americans that the best way to prevent AIDS is to abstain from sexual activity until adulthood and then to restrict sex to a monogamous, faithful relationship. This advice and the advice to say no to drugs can, of course, prevent the spread of most AIDS cases. Millions already follow this wise and timeless counsel, and our Nation is the poorer for the lost contributions of those who, in rejecting it, have suffered great pain, sorrow, and even death...

He continues in the next paragraph discussing what time of sexual education would be needed to prevent AIDS's continued spread:

Parents have the primary responsibility to help children see the beauty, goodness, and fulfillment of chastity before marriage and fidelity within it; know the blessings of stable family life; and say yes to life and no to drugs. Educational efforts should be locally determined and consistent with parental values. Educators can develop and relay accurate health information about AIDS without mandating a specific curriculum on this subject. Parents and educators should teach children not to engage in premarital sex or to use drugs, and should place sexuality in the context of marriage, fidelity, commitment, and maturity.³¹

Not only do these quotations completely bypass the question of the efficacy of his

administration's efforts- or at times lack thereof- in dealing with the AIDS crisis, but they claim that most people who get AIDS have it as a result of their own lack of socially acceptable decision making. This echoes the same type of sentiment as Jerry Falwell and others when they claimed that AIDS is the natural (or supernatural) response to decision making that did not follow socially acceptable mores, such as not keeping sexual activity reserved for monogamous heterosexual marriage. Moreover, the section on education expresses that sexual education should be "locally determined and consistent with parental values" and created "without mandating a specific curriculum on this subject". This is Reagan using this declaration to keep the federal and perhaps even state governments as uninvolved in the issue of sexual education for children as possible. The "parental values" on that "locally determined" level allow the religious beliefs of parents to influence what their children learn at school in regards to their health. This would appease conservatives who are in favor of religious moral teaching above scientific fact and small government types alike, while also being able to claim it as a positive action on behalf of his administration. This declaration embodies Reagan's stance on AIDS - that it is primarily a problem for people who are not following moral standards and regardless not something the federal government should be in.

Ronald Reagan was the perfect representative of the Religious Right. He believed in small government with more power to the free market and less to public safety nets, which were conditions the Religious Right preferred. He spoke of his conversion and other matters of faith in language they understood. However, the same qualities that made him a good president for the Religious Right meant that he was ill-suited for the AIDS crisis. He left health care underfunded, did not acknowledge the crisis until late in the timeline, and when he did so, he spoke using language similar to the evangelicals who believed AIDS was a natural consequence of "lifestyles" they did not approve of. His actions, or lack thereof, were not sufficient to guide the nation through a difficult period and many people died because of this. In the end, the very qualities that the Religious Right prized in Reagan condemned others to death by inaction.

Endnotes

¹ Matthew Avery Sutton, "Reagan, Religion, and the Culture Wars of the 1980s," in *A Companion to Ronald Reagan*, ed. Andrew L. Johns (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2015), 204-216.

² Ibid.

³ Stephen D. Johnson, Joseph B Tamney, and Ronald Burton, "Factors Influencing Vote for a Christian Right Candidate," *Review of Religious Research* vol. 31, no. 3 (Mar., 1990): 291-304, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3511619>

⁴ Sutton, "Reagan, Religion, and the Culture Wars of the 1980s," 204-216.

⁵ H. W. Brands, *Reagan* (New York: Doubleday, 2015) 159-162.

⁶ Ibid., 35-89.

⁷ Ibid., 122-128.

⁸ Ibid., 137-138.

⁹ Ibid., 156

¹⁰ Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2011) 263-264.

¹¹ Ibid., 269-271.

¹² Mary Carmichael, "How It Began: HIV Before the Age of AIDS," Frontline: The Age of AIDS. PBS, 2006.

¹³ "Timeline: 25 Years of AIDS," Frontline: The Age of AIDS. PBS, 2006.

¹⁴ Gina Kolata, "Boy's 1969 Death Suggests AIDS Invaded U.S. Several Times," *The New York Times*, October 28, 1987.

¹⁵ "Pneumocystis Pneumonia --- Los Angeles," *Mortality and Morbidity Weekly Report*, Center for Disease Control, June 5, 1981.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Interview: Jim Curran," Frontline: The Age of AIDS. PBS 2005-2006.

¹⁸ "Interview: Anthony Fauci," Frontline: The Age of AIDS. PBS, 2006.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Mark R. Kowalewski, "Religious Constructions of the AIDS Crisis," *Sociological Analysis* Vol. 51, No. 1 (Spring 1990): 91-96. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711343>

²¹ Donald P. Francis, "Commentary: Deadly AIDS policy failure by the highest levels of the US government: A personal look back 30 years later for lessons to respond better to future epidemics," *Journal of Public Health Policy* Vol. 33, No. 3 (August 2012): 290-300.

²² "Interview: Jim Curran," Frontline: The Age of AIDS. PBS 2005-2006.

²³ "Interview: Larry Kramer," Frontline: The Age of

AIDS. PBS, 2006.

²⁴ "Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Haiti," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981-1988*, Volume XLI, Global Issues 2, Part 1. (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 2

²⁵ Donald P. Francis, "Commentary: Deadly AIDS policy failure by the highest levels of the US government: A

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²⁶ "Interview: Margaret Heckler," Frontline: The Age of AIDS. PBS, 2006.

²⁷ Matthew Avery Sutton, "Reagan, Religion, and the Culture Wars of the 1980s," 204-216.

²⁸ "Interview: Margaret Heckler," 2006.

²⁹ "Timeline: 25 Years of AIDS," 2006.

³⁰ Landon Pavin, "President Reagan's American Foundation for AIDS Research Speech." Speech, May 31, 1987.

³¹ Ronald Reagan, "Proclamation 5709 -- AIDS Awareness and Prevention Month, 1987," September 29, 1987.

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