Reagan & AIDS

Surgeon General Goes Rogue

Of all the unlikely heroes of the AIDS crisis, Surgeon General C. Everett Koop probably topped the list. Looking like an Old Testament prophet and characterized as an "unbending moralist," the staunch conservative was challenged during confirmation hearings and lambasted in liberal-leaning editorials ("Dr. Kook").

Even before being confirmed in November 1981, Koop realized that "if there ever were a disease made for a surgeon general it was AIDS." However the administration did not want to take on "a grim and controversial subject," Koop recalled in his memoir, "AIDS [was] a no-win" situation. The Surgeon General was muzzled for the next five years, not allowed to speak publicly about AIDS.

Finally in early 1986, much to the Koop's surprise, President Reagan announced in a speech, "I'm asking the Surgeon General to prepare a major report to the American people on AIDS."

> *"I knew that telling the truth about AIDS, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth would not be well received in some places. One of those places would be the White House, at least in those offices where ideology would be the main concern... A large portion of the president's constituency was anti-homosexual, anti-drug abuse, anti-promiscuity, and anti-sex education; these people would not respond well to some of the things that would have to be said in a health report about AIDS."*
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> *Koop, C. Everett. Koop: The Memoirs of America's Family Doctor. Random House, 1991.*

Koop recognized the need to bypass political appointees "who placed conservative ideology above saving lives" in order to produce a medically factual report about AIDS. *The Surgeon General's Report on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome* was released in the fall with the aim to "inform you about AIDS, how it is transmitted, the relative risks of infection and how to prevent it." Shockingly, it included words such as penis, vagina, rectum, syringe, homosexual, bisexual, condoms, and recommended AIDS education in schools. Now the conservatives burned effigies of him, and liberals saw him as "a man of heroic proportions." The President? He did not read the report.



> *"I am the surgeon general of the heterosexuals and the homosexuals, of the young and the old, of the moral or the immoral, the married and the unmarried. I don't have the luxury of deciding which side I want to be on. So I can tell you how to keep yourself alive no matter what you are. That's my job."*
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> *Surgeon General Koop, interview in the Washington Post, 24 Mar. 1987*

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