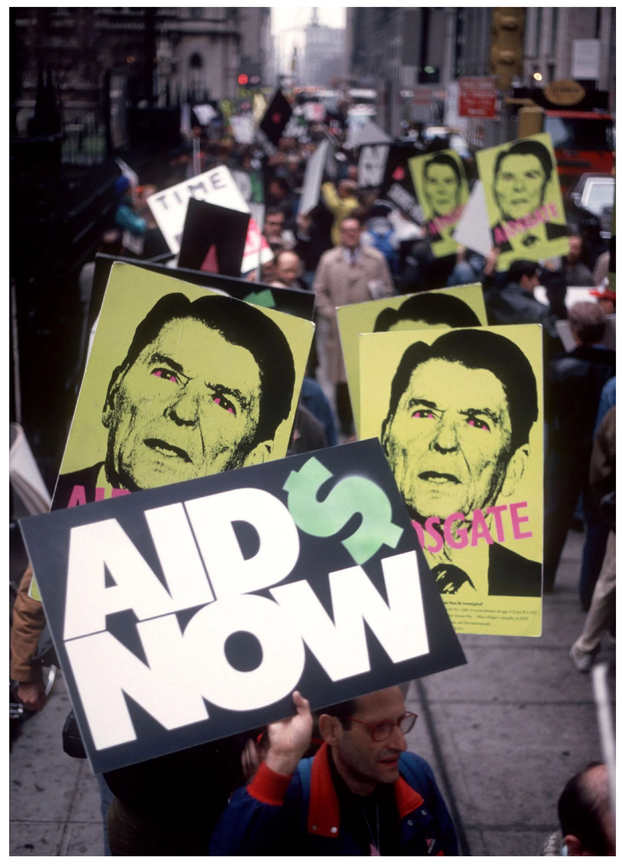
Reagan & AIDS

1987 AIDS Commission

After a mounting death toll and growing criticism, members of the administration recognized the need to "make the president seem more active in his response to AIDS." In response, the Presidential Commission on the Human Immunodeficiency Virus Epidemic was formed in May 1987.

At first glance the commission did not look promising. Nan Hunter, director of the ACLU's Lesbian and Gay Rights Projects noted, "As it stands, this is an AIDS commission virtually without experience on AIDS." Reagan tasked his domestic policy advisor Gary Bauer to take the lead in choosing commission members who reflected the administration's emphasis on "responsible sexual behavior based on fidelity, commitment, and maturity, placing sexuality within the context of marriage." Bauer opposed including a gay commissioner though he conceded, "If you feel we must appoint a homosexual, I would recommend a 'reformed' homosexual — this is someone not currently living a gay life style." Nancy Reagan insisted that there be gay representation on the commission. One gay member, geneticist Frank Lilly, was appointed along with doctors, a sex educator, a state legislator, corporate executives, the editor of the Saturday Evening Post, a retired admiral, and Cardinal John O'Conner.

Within three months, two members, including the commission chair, Dr. Eugene Mayberry, dropped out "claiming that they were unable to accomplish their goals within a group shaped so profoundly by political ideology." Richard Dunne, of the Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York, quipped "The AIDS epidemic is out of control, and it seems, so is the Presidential Commission on AIDS."



ACT UP demonstration, New York City, 1988. Photo by Allan Tannebaum.

Admiral James Watkins took over the leadership role and in the next six months held 43 hearings with more than 600 witnesses. The commission report proposed 597 recommendations in a comprehensive plan that covered public health services, including treatment for intravenous drug users, civil rights protections for HIV-positive people, a more robust social welfare net, and educational programs. In other words, much to the administration's chagrin, the commission called for the "federal government to increase dramatically the resources devoted to AIDS."



"James D. Watkins hands President Reagan the report of the presidential commission on the AIDS epidemic." Photo by James A. Parcell. *Washington Post*, 28 June 1988.

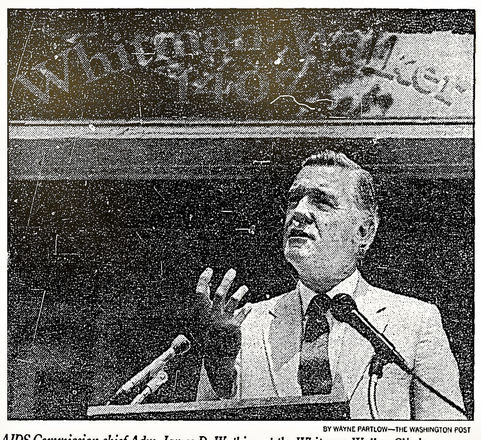
Reagan accepted the report stating, "The report embraces the major concepts my administration laid out over a year ago: to be compassionate towards victims of the disease; to care for them with dignity and kindness; and at the same time, to inform and educate our citizens so that we can prevent the further spread of the disease." And then, instead of implementing the recommendations, produced a "Ten-Point Presidential Action Plan" that emphasized testing.

Squires, Sally. "Setting the Course on AIDS." The Washington Post, 7 June 1988.

By Sally Squires
Washington Post Staff Writer

SETTING THE COURSE ON AIDS

HOW AN ADMIRAL TURNED AROUND THE PRESIDENT'S AIDS COMMISSION



BY WAYNE PARTLOW—THE WASHINGTON POST

AIDS Commission chief Adm. James D. Watkins at the Whitman-Walker Clinic.

On the surface, this silver-haired retired chief of naval operations who helped design "Star Wars" seems an unlikely warrior against an epidemic—particularly one as controversial as AIDS. But it's this former member of the Joint Chiefs, this straight-arrow Annapolis graduate, this devout Catholic who joined a senior officer prayer group at the Pentagon and is the father of six children—a man who has been urged to run for Senator in two states but is so outspoken that he has been nicknamed "Radio Free Watkins"—this is the one who emerged last week as the newest hero in the battle against AIDS.

Just 10 months ago, the Presidential Commission on the Human Immunodeficiency Virus foundered, plagued by controversy, understaffing and seeming ineptitude in the face of a disease that had claimed 24,070 American lives. When it seemed as though the commission was about to collapse, President Reagan tapped retired Adm. James D. Watkins, 61, then a member of the commission, to take over as chairman.

"Most of my old friends said, 'Watkins, this is just your bag. You always loved a challenge,' " he recalled recently. But many were not convinced that even the former chief of naval operations could turn around a commission mired in so much criticism.

Last week, Watkins delivered. His 279-page report makes new inroads into the issue of discrimination against patients and is sharply critical of the way the epidemic has been handled so far. The biggest surprise of the report is Watkins' own bold last chapter, which calls for making the nation's surgeon general more of a "general" in public health wars, creating in effect a federal head of epidemics.

Today and again on June 16 and 17, the full, 13-member commission gets the chance to offer additional comments—and propose amendments—to the chairman's recommendations before the final version goes to the President on June 24. But based on the two interim reports, which sailed through the full commission with only minor changes, few expect that there will be any significant alterations proposed by the commissioners for the main body of this final report—although Watkins' own last chapter may be a different story.

"We do have some commissioners who have very divergent points of view," says Polly Gault, the commission's executive director. "But I don't expect any major changes."

"There are some details that we disagree on, but the important things, I think we agree on pretty clearly," says Dr. Frank Lilly, chairman of the Department of Genetics at Albert Einstein Medical Center in New York and a former member of the Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York.

In fact, despite diverse backgrounds and early bickering, the commissioners were surprisingly unanimous in most of their actions during the panel's 10-month tenure that produced 43 hearings and site visits with 800 wit-

was also raised to be a Republican: his mother, after all, nominated Gen. Douglas MacArthur for president in the 1940s.

The first step in his career was taken when he attended the Naval Academy in Annapolis.

where my options are anything but clear. But I have the responsibility and I am a moral man."

As chief of the president's AIDS commission, however, Watkins followed in Surgeon General C. Everett Koop's footsteps and

youngest of seven children. His father died when he was 17. His mother was the first woman to run for the Senate in California. He was raised to be a strict Catholic, and now one of his sons has just entered the priesthood. He

lege in Arlington. "But we do—they do exist—and that is the reality with which I must deal. It is my responsibility to deal with it—in a world containing good and evil—in a world

ing on the Maritime Strategy, an overall plan to control shipping in U.S. waters. He also began a personal excellence program to help bring naval recruits up to speed once the draft ended and was a key player in the project

> *"We are not ready for this disease. This country is simply not ready for an emergency medical epidemic of this type, and we have got to do better because we don't know what the next mutation (of a virus) is going to be."*

> *"It has often been said that a society is judged by how well it responds in times of greatest human need. A tragedy such as the HIV epidemic brings a society face-to-face with the core of its established values, and offers an opportunity for the reaffirmation of compassion, justice, and human dignity. Many groups in our society have responded to this crisis so as to reaffirm these basic values. It is time for our nation to mobilize such a response in order to regain the ground already taken by the virus and then fight to annihilate this insidious foe."*
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> *Watkins, James. "Report from the Front in our War on AIDS." Los Angeles Times, 19 June 1988*