Reagan & AIDS

The Great Silence

The Great Communicator

Scholars have noted that Reagan's political success rested on the rhetoric and communication skills honed from his experience as an actor and presenter. His reputation as "the Great Communicator" thus made his silence about AIDS even more deafening. Reagan did not use the bully pulpit of the presidency to bring the nation together over the crisis, nor did he allay fears or attempt to lessen the stigma and discrimination faced by people with AIDS. One scholar mused, "Maybe a presidential expression of concern and compassion, similar to Mayor Dianne Feinstein's proclamations on AIDS, might have made it much harder to brand AIDS as a punishment from God."

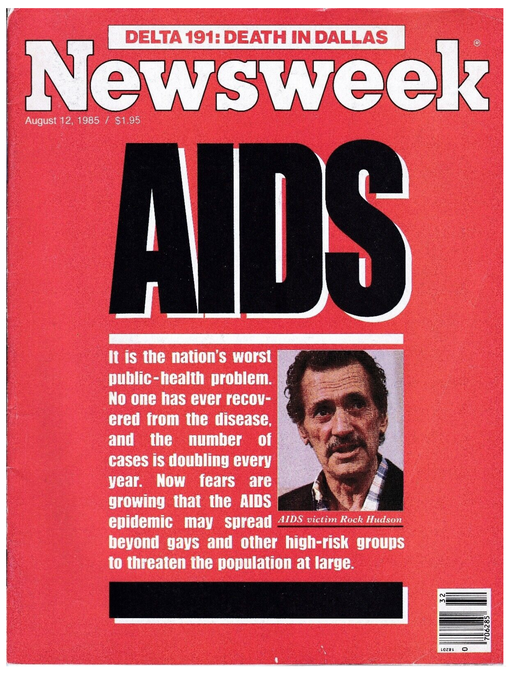
Finally, during a press conference in September 1985, Reagan answered a question about AIDS, affirming that it was "a top priority" for the administration and claiming it had been so for the last four years. In April the following year, in an address to the College of Physicians, in between "lower tax rates and fewer needless regulations" and Medicare reform. Reagan reiterates that AIDS is "public health enemy number one" and brags, "It took 40 years of study to learn as much about polio. It took 19 years to develop a vaccine against hepatitis B. But then our battle against AIDS has been like an emergency room operation: We've thrown everything we have into it."

"What a President chooses to express concern about... affects the whole national agenda. The failure of the "great communicator" to address what his own authorities called the most serious epidemic disease of the time helped prevent a full-scale national response to AIDS and made it that much easier to see AIDS as the concern of a particular pressure group rather than a health crisis."

Altman, Dennis. AIDS in the Mind of America. Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1986

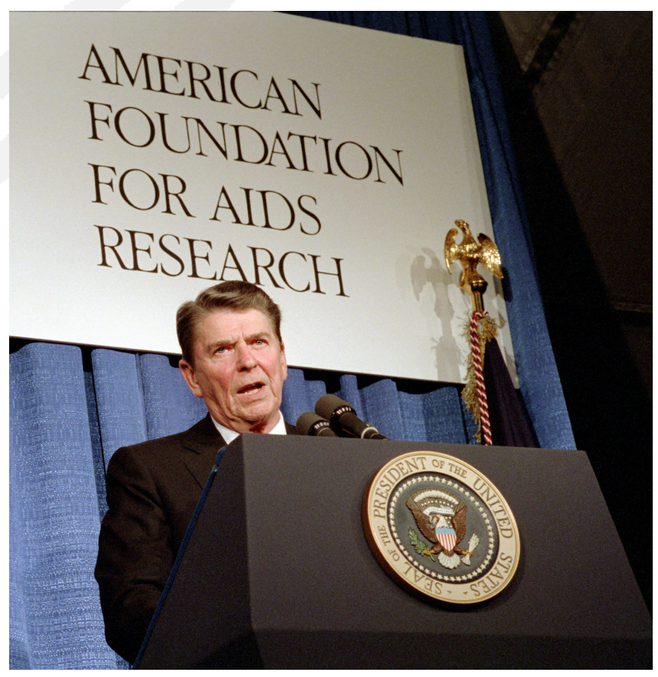
"My memory of the Reagan years was [of] a president that just was not present on the issue of HIV and AIDS. I don't know why Reagan wasn't present. You could give him the benefit of the doubt. It was an early epidemic, and no one really knew what was going on. Then when you factor in the people who were perceived to be most at risk for HIV and AIDS, they weren't on his radar; they weren't people who he cared about. That legacy, quite frankly, has plagued this pandemic. It comes back to bite us. In the beginning it was white gay men. We didn't care about white gay men; it was OK if they died. Then there were drug users; it was OK if they died. Then it was people in developing countries; it was OK if they didn't have access to treatment."

Frontline: Age of AIDS interview of Phill Wilson, Black AIDS Institute, 7 Dec. 2004.



During Reagan's first term as president, as AIDS deaths climbed from 130 to more than 6,000, he never publicly mentioned the disease. Even Reagan's diary is silent until news of actor Rock Hudson's illness breaks early in his second term: "Called Rock Hudson in a Paris Hospital where press said he had inoperable cancer. We never knew him too well but did know him & I thought under the circumstances I might be a reassurance. Now I learn from T.V. there is question as to his illness & rumors he is there for treatment of AIDS." [diary 24 July 1985]. White House physician Brigadier General John Hutton, also points to Rock Hudson as the time, the President, like most Americans, "finally took notice of how devastating the epidemic was becoming."

At the behest of actor Elizabeth Taylor, Reagan makes his first and only major speech on AIDS, at the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmFAR) Awards Dinner at the end of May 1987. The first part of his speech called for compassion, understanding and kindness – "What our citizens must know is this: America faces a disease that is fatal and spreading. And this calls for urgency, not panic. It calls for compassion, not blame. And it calls for understanding, not ignorance... This is a battle against disease, not against our fellow Americans. We mustn't allow those with the AIDS virus to suffer discrimination." Later it was revealed that the "compassionate" section was ghostwritten by AmFAR. According to Dr. Mathilde Grim, "we wrote the first half of the speech, where Reagan talked about compassion, justice, care — all the right things." Reagan would write in his diary that evening: "Well received until I mentioned routine testing for AIDS. A block of the Gay community in the tent booed me enthusiastically. All in all though I was pleased with the whole affair."



Reagan's first public speech discussing AIDS, 31 May 1987. National Archives.

The line plots cumulative AIDS deaths in the United States from 1981 to 1990. In 1981, there were 130 deaths; in 1985, 12,529; in 1988 at the end of Reagan's second term, 61,816 people had died of AIDS in the U.S.; and by the end of 1990, 120,453. [Figures from amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research]