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HIV and AIDS: The Shift from a Modern Plague to a Medical Malady Amanda Dahl

Humans have always feared disease and the death it brings. Reactions to disease can be intense and often bring out people's worst qualities. It was exactly this type of negative reaction that emerged as a response to the first identified cases of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in the United States in the early 1980s.¹ Although the disease was initially puzzling to all who came across it, once it was identified as a distinct disease, it soon came to be identified with gay men and intravenous (IV) drug users.² Associations with these groups in particular led to increased stigma surrounding these already marginalized communities. Knowledge of HIV and AIDS has greatly increased since the 1980s, though, and as a result, perceptions of the disease have changed. Since the initial outbreak, HIV/AIDS has been viewed as a threat to humanity. But if initially the public placed blame for the disease on its victims for their perceived moral deficiencies, it eventually began to view HIV/AIDS in medical terms, focusing on the disease itself as the problem. This shift is most emphasized in how Ronald Reagan's administration handled addressing HIV and AIDS compared to George W. Bush's administration; Reagan chose to ignore the problem for many years while Bush initiated the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), directly addressing the disease on an international level. It is easy to place blame or give credit to individuals based on key actions, however, as public representatives, presidents also reflect the will of the people. Just as public sentiment and pop culture affected attitudes towards HIV/AIDS, so did presidents and their administrations, although neither remained a dominating influence over the other. Overall, there were three major influences on the shift in the perception of HIV/AIDS. These included the presidential administration, pop culture, and evangelicals. Pop culture, as this paper will call it, will refer largely to the influence of major celebrities and icons in addition to major publications with a wide audience. Although in the early 1980s, the

¹ Renata Simone et al., *The Age of AIDS*, videorecording (PBS Home Video, 2006).

² Ibid.

presidential administration and its lack of response to HIV/AIDS most influenced rhetoric surrounding the disease, by the mid-1980s, pop culture had begun to gain hold, starting to shift public sentiments away from a severely negative perception of the disease. In the beginning of the epidemic, evangelical opinion also meshed with public opinion, however, these opinions began to diverge later in the 1980s. Throughout the 1990s, the sway of pop culture on public opinion secured a stronger hold, encouraging a more benevolent view of those affected by HIV/AIDS, while evangelical influence and its continued condemnation of those with HIV/AIDS lost ground and became a minority viewpoint. Both pop culture and evangelicals impacted the presidential administration in the 1990s, although there was an innate tension between the two as they desired opposing actions. Heading into the early 2000s, religious influence further faded, however, and President Bush reasserted the role of the President in heavily influencing public perception of those with HIV/AIDS. Through initiating PEPFAR, he helped turn HIV/AIDS into an imperative issue, pushing both evangelicals and the general public to see it as a worthy cause.

From the beginning, the issue of morality was at the center of discussions of HIV and AIDS, and like many other diseases it was viewed through the lens of past epidemics. Powel Kazanjian approached the topic from a historical perspective, analyzing the pandemic through the context of past conceptions of disease. In the 19th century, diseases were conceptualized in a moralistic framework and seen as pestilences. Those who became sick were thought to suffer from some moral deficiency, and generally the environment they lived in was also believed to increase their susceptibility to disease. The poor tended to live in filth, and this, along with their supposed lack of morality, was believed to cause disease. A parallel was also drawn to the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. HIV/AIDS was generally constructed as a moral issue, especially due to its association with gay men and IV drug users, individuals already viewed as morally lacking by much of the public.³ Similarly, Thomas R. Blair placed the initial outbreak of HIV in the context of past diseases, particularly the plague. Comparing mental health professionals involved since the start of the San Francisco outbreak to plague doctors, Blair emphasized the historical marginalization of all plague victims. Just

³ Powel Kazanjian, "The AIDS Pandemic in Historic Perspective," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 69, no. 3 (1 July 2014): 351–82.

as past victims were pathologized and certain groups tended to be identified as the cause, the gay male community came to be pathologized by the contemporary general public. Repercussions of this persecution had very real psychological effects, in addition to the devastating effects the disease had on physical and mental health. As a result, mental health professionals, although often overlooked, were key figures in the initial response and in developing future ways to treat HIV/AIDS.⁴

AIDS was also viewed as a reason for a “moral panic.” In examining the development of how HIV and AIDS were viewed in the 1980s from a sociological perspective, Janet Holland *et al.* described the early conceptualization of the disease as a “gay cancer.” This later developed into a “moral panic” in the mid-1980s as it became clear that this was not solely a gay man’s disease, nor confined to other perceived high-risk groups. All were vulnerable. For many, AIDS became a symbol of fear and of what was wrong with society, exemplifying the “wrongness” of homosexuality.⁵ Evangelicals and many other religious groups also constructed AIDS as a moral problem, often describing it as a God-sent punishment on sinners.⁶ In general, news of HIV/AIDS sparked panic and fear, including one instance of a dentist transmitting HIV to a patient during a tooth extraction.⁷ For the most part, the medical community resisted constructing HIV/AIDS as a moral issue, instead focusing on the medical aspects. Unfortunately, there were still some health care workers who refused to treat HIV positive patients.⁸ Some refused to help patients out of fear of catching the disease themselves, and others saw the disease as a punishment from God.⁹

Having examined several general interpretations of how HIV/AIDS has been approached, particularly with regard to the 1980s, it becomes important to more closely examine this era. Within the public, there was widespread fear present from

⁴ Thomas R. Blair, “Plague Doctors in the HIV/AIDS Epidemic: Mental Health Professionals and the ‘San Francisco Model,’ 1981-1990,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 90, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 279–311.

⁵ Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, and Sue Scott, “AIDS: From Panic Stations to Power Relations Sociological Perspectives and Problems,” *Sociology* 24, no. 3 (1 Aug. 1990): 499–518.

⁶ Tim Murphy, “HIV Mystery: Solved?,” *Nation* 302, no. 11 (14 March 2016): 1011.

⁷ Mark Rom, “Health-Care Workers and HIV: Policy Choice in a Federal System,” *Publius* 23, no. 3 (1993): 135.

⁸ Kazanjian, “The AIDS Pandemic in Historic Perspective,” 356.

⁹ Tricia Lootens, “AIDS: Too Few Facts,” *Off Our Backs*, 30 Nov. 1983.

the first sign of the disease. San Francisco was also one of the major centers of the epidemic. Although considered a liberal city, many residents refused to frequent restaurants owned by gay men and steered clear of “gay” neighborhoods out of fear. Some gay men were even evicted from their homes.¹⁰ Police in both San Francisco and Washington D.C. were also provided with masks and gloves when dealing with protests.¹¹ One man actually reported that healthcare workers refused to wash his partner or clean his hospital room, and when the partner was moved to another hospital, “the pilot wanted to throw him off the plane.”¹² There was considerable worry that the disease could spread through casual contact. In 1983, according to a Gallup poll, 25 percent of people believed that HIV/AIDS was spread by casual contact and 16 percent were unsure.¹³

Much of the fear was also based in religion and the idea that God punishes sinners. A doctor from New Orleans was quoted saying “do you think God’s trying to punish them? ‘Cause if he is, it ain’t enough.”¹⁴ This sentiment was also very much in line with the general right-wing viewpoint, which asserted the “plague” was here to force individuals back to being in monogamous, heterosexual relationships.¹⁵ Religion very much affected politics, and many politicians subscribed to the view that HIV/AIDS was a disease of sinners. At a Republican convention in southern California early in the 1980s, there was a bumper sticker that proclaimed: “AIDS -- it’s killing all the right people.”¹⁶

Some of the most conservative religious groups also made the most extreme statements. In California, the Traditional Values Coalition was run by Lou Sheldon, a former Presbyterian minister. Beginning in the 1980s, he tried to warn others about the “gay threat.” Although Sheldon was not specifically referencing HIV/AIDS, his sentiments represented the view of a considerable number of Americans at the time, particularly highly religious ones. They thought the “gays” were out to get them, threatening the sanctity of the family. The view also found tacit acceptance in the Reagan administration, where Sheldon’s daughter, Andrea

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.; Simone et al., *The Age of AIDS*.

¹² Lootens, “AIDS.”

¹³ Eleanor Singer, Theresa F. Rogers, and Mary Corcoran, “A Report: AIDS,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (1987): 580–95.

¹⁴ Lootens, “AIDS.”

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Simone et al., *The Age of AIDS*.

Lafferty, served as an official.¹⁷ Evangelicals, especially, were associated with a negative view of gay individuals. Dr. Ralph Blair, an evangelical, wrote in 1983 of the shame he felt in being associated with the general evangelical attitude towards AIDS. He wrote how “the following [comments] are made in our name: ‘To add insult to sodomy, those who cry in the streets for “Gay Rights” are now screaming for you and me to come up with millions of dollars in tax money to find a cure for the diseases spread by their continuing iniquities.’” Blair did not agree with this view and found it distasteful. In writing his piece, Blair also commented on how “justice has not been what we have found in the coverage of AIDS in the fundamentalist press,” implying that his perspective was that of an outlier, and most evangelicals subscribed to views that constructed gay individuals as sinful and AIDS as “God’s judgment.”¹⁸

Major events occurring in the realm of popular culture, however, began to contribute to a change in how many people conceptualized HIV/AIDS. Pop culture, as this paper will call it, will refer largely to the influence of major celebrities and icons in addition to major publications with a wide audience. Rock Hudson was the first famous figure to publicly announce his diagnosis with AIDS, and according to *People* magazine, “his words released social avalanches” that were “still rolling strong” in December 1985.¹⁹ In July, Hudson had gone to Paris to see a specialist on AIDS regarding a new treatment, but had fallen ill during the stay and was hospitalized. He was then transported to UCLA medical center.²⁰ The spokeswoman also told the press that Hudson had known about his condition for a year already but claimed that “he [did not] have any idea now how he contracted AIDS. Nobody around him has AIDS.”²¹ She claimed he was recovering, although this was actually highly inaccurate.²² The announcement came as a shock to the public. Hudson was considered a heartthrob and had often played the romantic lead in films. Mervyn Silverman, San Francisco Health Director, said that when his

¹⁷ Evelyn Schlatter, “18 Anti-Gay Groups and Their Propaganda,” *Intelligence Report*, 4 Nov. 2010, <<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2010/18-anti-gay-groups-and-their-propaganda>>.

¹⁸ Ralph Blair, “Archimedes, AIDS and Antigay Antagonists,” *REVIEW*, 9 Aug. 1983.

¹⁹ People Staff, “Rock Hudson,” *People*, 23 Dec. 1985.

²⁰ Simone et al., *The Age of AIDS*.

²¹ AP, “Hudson Has Aids, Spokesman Says,” *The New York Times*, 26 July 1985,.

²² Times Wire Services, “Rock Hudson Has Had AIDS for Year--Friend,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July 1985; Simone et al., *The Age of AIDS*.

mother-in-law heard about Hudson she had called him and told Silverman “I didn’t realize AIDS was such a problem.” He had been telling her about the issue for years.²³ Those much farther removed from the issue also had similar reactions. Hudson was “someone everybody knew and accepted as practically a member of the family” according to *People*. It drove many Americans to the conclusion that AIDS truly was a danger to the entire nation and that it needed a response. Over \$1.8 million in private donations towards AIDS research and patient support poured in between July and December of 1985, over twice as much as in 1984.²⁴

The revelation that Hudson had AIDS also led to speculation about his sexual orientation. For years, many members of the public had suspected he was gay, based on the reported words of acquaintances, but Hudson had never confirmed or denied claims.²⁵ In August 1985, *People* ran a cover story on Hudson. They revealed that those in Hollywood had known he was gay for years, although it had always been kept a secret from the public. In 1955, Hudson’s agent had even arranged his marriage to Phyllis Gates, the agent’s secretary, in order to keep up pretenses.²⁶ For the majority of Americans, he would have been the first gay man they could identify by name. He familiarized the public with AIDS. Lela Scherer, an 83-year-old fan from Olney, Illinois said that prior to Hudson’s announcement she “hadn’t heard of AIDS really.” She and her husband were deeply disturbed by the news. They could not accept that a man with Hudson’s impeccable public image would ever be diagnosed with AIDS. Scherer and her husband both were shocked that he was gay, too, claiming “he was just always such a good person.”²⁷ Like many other Americans, they saw AIDS as a moral issue. Hudson’s diagnosis, however, would prove to be a major turning point in how AIDS was constructed. Although, many inevitably would continue to see AIDS as a gay man’s disease, Hudson’s diagnosis brought the issue to public attention and forced Americans to confront the idea that the man they were such huge fans of was, in fact, gay. It shook people’s conceptions of the world. The writer of a Broadway play about AIDS, William Hoffman, was quoted talking about the importance of the announcement: “If Rock Hudson can have it, nice

²³ Simone et al., *The Age of AIDS*.

²⁴ People Staff, “Rock Hudson.”

²⁵ Joseph Berger, “Rock Hudson, Screen Idol, Dies at 59,” *The New York Times*, 3 Oct. 1985.

²⁶ Jeff Yarbrough, “Rock Hudson: On Camera and Off,” *People*, 12 Aug. 1985.

²⁷ Ibid.

people can have it. It's just a disease, not a moral affliction." Similarly, psychologist Robert Eichberg talked about the psychological aspects of the revelation and how it could influence the public, telling *People* how "it's difficult to turn against someone you love, and the public has grown up with him."²⁸ The case of Rock Hudson challenged people across America to think differently about what many viewed as a purely moral issue.

The government also took notice. Reagan personally called Hudson when he was hospitalized in Paris, despite having not yet publicly addressed AIDS.²⁹ With AIDS drawn into the national news cycle, it was inevitable that the pressure on Reagan to address HIV/AIDS increased, culminating in the first public address on the topic in September 1985. Later, after Hudson died on October 3, 1985, Congress pledged \$221 million towards AIDS funding.³⁰ The influence Rock Hudson carried had forced the issue of HIV/AIDS, and moving into the second half of the 1980s, the government finally sought to address the disease to a greater extent. Earlier in the 1980s, the government's silence had greatly impacted the issue of HIV/AIDS, stalling research and movements toward prevention and education, but in the latter half of the 1980s, the influence had shifted to lie with the public.

Public opinion appeared to heavily influence Reagan's administration and how it handled HIV/AIDS. Many critics, such as Samuel O. Thier, have placed the blame on Reagan for the government's failure to address the issue of HIV/AIDS in a timely manner, believing his negligence only served to help reinforce stigma and discrimination.³¹ Between 1981 and 1984, Reagan made no mentions of HIV or AIDS in any public remarks.³² By 1983, the *New York Times* had reported that many were already criticizing Reagan for what they perceived as "indifference" to the disease. In 1985, the administration claimed that a hefty sum of over \$500 million had already been dedicated to research, although they included in that the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ People Staff, "Rock Hudson."

³¹ Samuel O. Thier, "Responding to the AIDS Epidemic: Science vs. Politics," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 137, no. 1 (1993): 110–16.

³² "A Timeline of HIV/AIDS," accessed 15 May 2017, <<https://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/aids-timeline/#year-1981>>.

\$126 million budgeted for 1986 alone.³³ Fewer than three years prior in 1983, only \$2 million had been set aside by Congress for research that year. At that point, there was already a 40 percent fatality rate for those affected by HIV/AIDS. Writer Edith Butler believed that this was a paltry amount designated for research given the high fatality rate, theorizing that Congress considered the disease not worth more funding because it primarily affected the gay community. It was a politically dangerous topic to deal with due to the common belief that AIDS was a moral issue and those affected were undeserving of help.³⁴ And although Reagan claimed that “\$126 million in a single year for research has to be something of a vital contribution,” one top scientist working on HIV/AIDS research disagreed, stating that this amount of funding was not enough “to go forward and really attack the problem.”³⁵ As leader of the government at the time, Reagan was hardly blameless. He certainly could have advocated more strongly for research funding, and even after increasing funding, he failed to increase it to what some scientists believed would be an impactful level. At least in the beginning, the government gave the impression that it tacitly accepted the moral view of the disease in failing to outright reject that view. The extended time that it took to actually increase research funding also sent the message that this issue was of low priority, even though the funding was aimed at uncovering more about the disease, which would later help dispel many misconceptions.

When Reagan finally did speak out publicly about AIDS in September 1985 he did so shortly after the death of Rock Hudson. He was likely pushed to address the issue due to the publicity surrounding Hudson’s death. Unfortunately, Reagan failed to assuage public fears. Talking about the possibility of AIDS spreading through casual contact such as between children at school, Reagan claimed that “medicine has not come forth unequivocally and said, this [manner of contact] we know for a fact...is safe.”³⁶ This was a vast departure from what the original speech had said. Reagan was supposed to assure the public that casual contact was safe, however, John G. Roberts, White House lawyer and current Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, had written a legal memo telling Reagan not to make this

³³ Philip M. Boffey, “Reagan Defends Financing for AIDS,” *The New York Times*, 18 Sept. 1985.

³⁴ Edith Butler, “AIDS: Political Waves,” *WomenWise*, 30 June 1983.

³⁵ Boffey, “Reagan Defends Financing for AIDS.”

³⁶ *Ibid.*

claim, incorrectly believing it lacked evidence. Roberts appeared to fear the government could be held liable if HIV was later found to pass through casual contact. Top public health officials, including James Mason, Director of the CDC, immediately responded with their own press conference, contradicting the President's claims.³⁷ The damage had already been done, however, and fear was still very much prevalent. In 1986, a *Newsweek* poll conducted by the Gallup Organization found that 49 percent of the public believed that a fear of HIV/AIDS infection was contributing to discrimination against homosexual individuals.³⁸ The administration was certainly to blame for the spread of misinformation and for addressing the issue so late.

Reagan's speech also occurred, quite notably, after he was elected to his second term as President. In October 1983, a year before the election in 1984, there was already talk about his potential for re-election. He was having trouble finding support with evangelical voters though, according to a piece in *The Daily Oklahoman*. When comparing Reagan and Senator Jon Glenn, D-Ohio, a poll of 1,000 evangelicals and religious fundamentalists had Reagan winning 41.3 percent to 37.2 percent. When compared to Walter F. Mondale, Reagan won 47 percent to 33.8 percent.³⁹ Although Mondale was eventually the other contender for the presidency, the slim margin by which Reagan might have won over Glenn would still have been worrying to his re-election campaign.⁴⁰ Additionally, polling at under 50 percent would have been concerning, especially because "evangelicals [were] Reagan's natural constituency."⁴¹ This constituency of evangelicals was one of the most opposed to homosexuality and the idea of providing any government aid. HIV/AIDS was a gay man's disease in their view, making it unworthy of research and those with it unworthy of help.⁴² In avoiding public discussion of

³⁷ Simone et al., *The Age of AIDS*.

³⁸ Ethel Klein, "U.S. Public Opinion Toward HIV/AIDS: Perceptions of Risk, Bias, and Government Spending" (Gay Men's Health Crisis, 2009), http://www.gmhc.org/files/editor/file/perceptions_klein3.pdf.

³⁹ Denise Gamino, "Evangelicals Reluctant to Aid Reagan, Poll Says," *Oklahoman, The*, 14 Oct. 1983.

⁴⁰ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, "United States Presidential Election of 1984," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/United-States-presidential-election-of-1984>.

⁴¹ Gamino, "Evangelicals Reluctant to Aid Reagan, Poll Says."

⁴² James Ayers, "The Quagmire of HIV/AIDS Related Issues Which Haunt the Church," *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 49, no. 2 (19 Jan. 1995): 201–10.

HIV/AIDS, Reagan avoided offending a major portion of his supporter base. Although it may have been incidental that Reagan spoke about HIV/AIDS after his re-election, the timing certainly lends itself to the idea that Reagan avoided the subject to increase his chances of being elected to a second term. In this instance, it appears the public view, and especially the religious conservative view, on HIV/AIDS held major sway in how the topic was discussed on a national level. It was Reagan's choice to avoid the subject, but it was certainly heavily influenced by national opinion.

Although Reagan's 1985 speech contained inaccuracies and demonstrated his hesitancy to make any firm claims in regard to HIV/AIDS, it did appear to have a bit of positive influence in bringing the issue to increased government attention. In 1986, the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome Service Coordination Act of 1986 was developed in the Senate. It allocated funds to be put towards diagnosing and treating HIV/AIDS, along with funding health care, mental health services, case management services, and HIV/AIDS education. Demonstrating a shift away from a focus on gay men, the Act placed a specific emphasis on helping children who were born to HIV/AIDS positive mothers and had acquired the disease from them. The Act also acknowledged the rate of infection through heterosexual contact had increased and emphasized the need to treat all those who were ill in a humane manner.⁴³ Although the public often still constructed the disease as a moral issue, the government was no longer as reluctant to address or fund HIV/AIDS research as it had been only a few years prior.

From 1986 on, descriptions of the disease were increasingly medical in nature and acknowledged a greater universality to the disease. Surgeon General, C. Everett Koop, also released the "Surgeon General's Report on AIDS" that year. It emphasized that "AIDS is *not* spread by common everyday contact but by sexual contact" and told readers, "We would know by now if AIDS were passed by casual, non-sexual contact."⁴⁴ The report also encouraged education on the disease and voluntary HIV testing.⁴⁵ One of the most controversial aspects of the report

⁴³ U.S. Senate. 100th Congress, 1st Session. *S. 1374, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome Service Coordination Act of 1986*. Washington, Government Printing Office, 1987.

⁴⁴ C. Everett Koop, "Surgeon General's Report on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome" (Office of the Surgeon General, Oct. 1986), 5.

⁴⁵ Koop, "Surgeon General's Report on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome."

was its endorsement of condoms to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.⁴⁶ Koop also repudiated the moral view of HIV/AIDS, writing:

At the beginning of the AIDS epidemic many Americans had little sympathy for people with AIDS. The feeling was that somehow people from certain groups ‘deserved’ their illness. Let us put those feelings behind us. We are fighting a disease, not people. Those who are afflicted are sick people and need our care as do all sick patients.⁴⁷

This was echoed to some degree in Reagan’s first official speech on HIV/AIDS on May 31, 1987. He encouraged “urgency, not panic...compassion, not blame...[and] understanding, not ignorance.” And he finally publicly stated “AIDS is not a casually contagious disease,” something he had failed to do in 1985.⁴⁸ Although met with mixed reviews due to the proposal that HIV positive individuals be barred from entering the country and encouragement of testing that could lead to discrimination, it was still extremely important that Reagan come out in support of HIV/AIDS from a medical perspective and revise his previous statement that casual contact may spread HIV/AIDS.⁴⁹

On the other hand, Reagan’s speech rested upon the idea that those with HIV/AIDS may be morally corrupt and this manner of discourse played into an innately negative view of the disease. Although Reagan stated that the “final judgment is up to God; our part is to ease the suffering and to find a cure,” simply the fact that he inserted this phrase into the speech referenced and, in a way, validated the negative view that many held of those afflicted with the disease.⁵⁰ The speech on the whole sent a rather mixed message. It drew upon preconceived notions of the disease as a moral one, and although it urged compassion and was meant to assuage fears, it never completely dismissed the idea of AIDS as a moral issue like Koop’s report had. As president, Reagan’s voice would have held greater

⁴⁶ John-Manuel Andriote, “Doctor, Not Chaplain: How a Deeply Religious Surgeon General Taught a Nation About HIV,” *The Atlantic*, 4 March 2013.

⁴⁷ Koop, “Surgeon General’s Report on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome,” 6.

⁴⁸ “Remarks at the American Foundation for AIDS Research Awards Dinner,” 31 May 1987, <<https://www.reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/speeches/1987/053187a.htm>>; Boffey, “Reagan Defends Financing for AIDS.”

⁴⁹ Philip M. Boffey, “Reagan Urges Wide AIDS Testing but Does Not Call for Compulsion,” *The New York Times*, 1 June 1987.

⁵⁰ “Remarks at the American Foundation for AIDS Research Awards Dinner.”

sway over the public and drawn greater attention than a surgeon general's report. Koop's scientific treatment of the disease demonstrated that the government was in theory willing to move forward looking at AIDS as a disease, but Reagan's speech demonstrates the continued political delicacy of this position.

Although Reagan's speech was not a hit with most conservatives, it was Koop that gained the greatest notoriety in the conservative and evangelical communities in 1988. He launched the *Understanding AIDS* campaign to educate the public on the dangers of HIV/AIDS and how it was spread, talking about the disease frankly and scientifically.⁵¹ The largest public health mail campaign in the history of the United States up until then, Koop had a booklet sent to 107 million homes. It rejected the construction of HIV/AIDS as a disease resulting from sin and promoted the use of condoms. Conservatives and evangelicals were furious and saw this as a betrayal. Koop, himself, was an evangelical, but as a medical doctor and public health official, he believed that the science of the disease and education were more important than anything else.⁵²

For the first half of the 1980s, the public and religious groups were generally united in their view of HIV/AIDS as a moral issue. From the mid-1980s and onward, however, the view of the general public begins to diverge from that of religious groups, especially evangelicals. With the publicity Rock Hudson provided the disease and with increased government efforts at education, the public fear of HIV/AIDS decreased. It is likely that what created the largest impact in decreasing public fear was the emphasis that the disease was not casually contagious. During the summer of 1987, for example, Fire Island in New York saw renewed tourism. The previous three summers, the island had faced economic hardship because it was well known that a large population of gay men lived on the island causing many vacationers to avoid the once-popular vacation spot.⁵³ Renewed tourism, however, demonstrated a changing conception of the disease. Even if it was still a moral issue for many, there was substantially less fear surrounding the disease. It is still likely, however, that none of those tourists were evangelicals. That particular group was firmly set in seeing HIV/AIDS as a moral

⁵¹ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, "Understanding AIDS" (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988).

⁵² Andriote, "Doctor, Not Chaplain."

⁵³ Philip S. Gutis, "Fire Island Pines in Age of AIDS: Fire Island Resort in the Age of AIDS: 'High Tea' and Comfort," *New York Times*, 8 June 1987.

disease and even as of 1988, had an irrevocable stance that sex should only occur between a married man and woman, framing all other actions sinful.⁵⁴ Those who subscribed to these beliefs would have avoided even association with Fire Island due to its substantial population of gay men. Although this divergence of popular and evangelical opinion was only beginning in the 1980s, by the 1990s the gap between the two continued to widen.

Even within the 1980s there was the start of a shift. Demonstrating a decreasing gap in public knowledge about HIV/AIDS compared to the scientific community, between 1983 and 1986, Gallup polls had found that there was a 21 percent decrease in the percentage of people who believed that HIV/AIDS was passed through kissing; it was down to 29 percent from 50 percent. Additionally, only 6 percent of people believed that they could catch HIV/AIDS from working in the same office as an HIV positive individual in 1986 according to a CBS poll. This was in comparison to 12 percent one year prior according to CBS/*New York Times*. Another Gallup poll in 1987 indicated that in the past year, the percentage of people who believed AIDS patients should be treated with compassion had increased from 78 percent to 87 percent. Furthermore, there was also an increase of people who believed that it was wrong to dismiss an individual from a job for being HIV positive; it jumped from 43 percent to 64 percent.⁵⁵ On the other hand, 37 percent of Americans said in 1985 that due to HIV/AIDS, their opinion of “homosexuals” had changed for the worse.⁵⁶ Though progress was made in decreasing stigma surrounding the disease and gay individuals from the early 1980s to later in the decade, there was still a long way to go until affected groups saw even the semblance of equality.

In pop culture, attention to HIV and AIDS gradually increased. Ryan White was a young man who suffered from hemophilia and was diagnosed with AIDS in 1984 as a result of a blood transfusion. He was one of the first children to develop AIDS, and his case raised the issue of if he would be allowed to attend school as an individual with AIDS. It took over a year and a half of legal battles for him to be re-admitted to public school, and the issue reached the national news, making

⁵⁴ Ayers, “The Quagmire of HIV/AIDS Related Issues Which Haunt the Church,” 204.

⁵⁵ “Gallup Poll Shows Rise in Compassion For Victims of AIDS,” *The New York Times*, 22 Nov. 1987.

⁵⁶ “37% in Poll Say AIDS Altered Their Attitude to Homosexuals,” *The New York Times*, 15 Dec. 1985.

White famous.⁵⁷ His story increased awareness of the issues facing those infected with HIV/AIDS and helped inspire the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency Act of 1990, which by August 18, 1990 had passed through Congress and become law. The Act outlined how assistance should be established and funded for those with HIV who needed assistance and also promoted early intervention.⁵⁸ White had inspired political action that would have a meaningful impact on the lives of thousands, and he “open[ed] many hearts,” promoting a tolerance for HIV/AIDS-afflicted individuals. After his death on April 8, 1990, celebrities and friends alike mourned him. Reagan was even quoted saying, “We owe it to Ryan to open our hearts and minds to those with AIDS.” Yet for all this acceptance, or at least the façade of it, there were also many who would have disagreed with the compassionate route. In Chicago, an evangelical church banned a 5-year-old from Bible classes because he had AIDS. After public backlash, the decision was reversed, but this occurred only a few weeks after White’s death. The “AIDS frenzy” was no longer what it had been in the early 1980s, and much of the general public appeared inclined to change their views on HIV positive individuals, however, this example of the evangelical church demonstrates that intolerance was still very much present.⁵⁹ Furthermore, this view tended to be found within conservative religious groups.

Bringing an even more universal and relatable face to AIDS, the movie *Philadelphia*, starring Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington, was released in 1993. Hanks played a lawyer who is fired because he has AIDS, and Washington played the lawyer who reluctantly takes on his case. Although the tale is fictional, it certainly reflects the discrimination that many people with AIDS had historically faced. In his review, critic Roger Ebert said he believed that “for moviegoers with an antipathy to AIDS but an enthusiasm for stars like Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington, it may help to broaden understanding of the disease.”⁶⁰ The film had been considered a risk, but one critic saw the film as a success even though it

⁵⁷ Health Resources and Services Administration, “Who Was Ryan White?,” *Health Resources and Services Administration*, accessed 19 May 2017, <<https://hab.hrsa.gov/about-ryan-white-hivaids-program/who-was-ryan-white>>.

⁵⁸ Kennedy, Edward M., “Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency Act of 1990,” Pub. L. No. S.2240 (1990), <<https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-bill/2240>>.

⁵⁹ Clarence Page, “Ryan White Did Not Open All Hearts,” *Chicago Tribune*, 22 April 1990.

⁶⁰ Roger Ebert, “Philadelphia,” *RogerEbert.com*, 14 Jan. 1994.

unfortunately made Hanks' character "a gay Everyman."⁶¹ In a harsher condemnation, famed activist Larry Kramer lampooned the film for its inaccurate portrayal of AIDS saying it did not "have anything to do with the AIDS I know." Kramer refuted other claims that the movie could change people's views on AIDS, writing "it's simply not good enough and I'd rather people not see it at all."⁶² Although Kramer's criticism certainly has merit, his claim that the movie had no effect on how AIDS was viewed was an extreme stance. *Philadelphia* made over \$77 million, and Hanks won an Academy Award in 1994 for Best Actor in a Leading Role.⁶³ The revenue alone demonstrates that the public engaged with the film, and just watching the film would have influenced how people thought of AIDS (even if their opinion did not change). It is the positive critical reception, however, that may be more telling. Hollywood was generally considered liberal, but even in the 1980s, Rock Hudson had been careful not to openly reveal he was gay to the public; it was still a delicate subject. That Hanks could win an Academy Award for his portrayal of a gay, HIV positive man in a box-office hit shows a shift toward a more open and public acknowledgement of HIV positive individuals as human. Reflecting on the film in 2015, the film's screenwriter, Ron Nyswaner, recalled that he had heard positive feedback on how the film changed the pop culture image of gay individuals, even being told once by an individual that "My parents stopped talking to me, then they saw *Philadelphia*."⁶⁴

A comparison of Gallup polls in 1987 and 1997 also indicated a decrease in discriminatory attitudes towards those with AIDS. In 1987, 51 percent of people had agreed that "it's people's own fault if they get AIDS," whereas in 1997, 40 percent of people agreed with the statement. There was also a decline in those who believed that AIDS was "a punishment for the decline in moral standards" from 43 percent to 31 percent. The greatest change, however, was in the percentage of people who believed those with AIDS should be isolated from society, down to 7 percent from 21 percent in 1987. In a comment to *USA Today*, Human Rights

⁶¹ Janet Maslin, "Review/Film: Philadelphia; Tom Hanks as an AIDS Victim Who Fights the Establishment," *New York Times*, 22 Dec. 1993.

⁶² Larry Kramer, "Philadelphia Sorry," *The Chicago Reader*, 13 Jan. 1994.

⁶³ IMDb, "Philadelphia (1993)," *IMDb*, accessed 19 May 2017.

⁶⁴ Ramin Setoodeh, "'Philadelphia' Screenwriter on Gay Marriage, Legacy of Tom Hanks AIDS Drama," *Variety*, 1 July 2015.

Campaign fund spokesman, David Smith, said he believed that “the irrational fear with AIDS has declined.”⁶⁵

Despite an increasingly positive view of those who identified as gay or lesbian, there was still considerable stigma in the 1990s. Those with HIV or AIDS might be pitiable and in need of help but to be gay or lesbian was still seen as a problem for many Americans. This was extremely evident in the reactions to Ellen DeGeneres coming out both on her sitcom *Ellen* and in real life. Before the episode in which DeGeneres came out, there were many rumors circulating, and a poll run by *Entertainment Weekly* found that “44% of respondents say the trend toward more gay characters on TV is bad...[and] 40% believe viewership would fall if Ellen came out-and 41% wouldn't let their kids watch a sitcom whose main character is gay.”⁶⁶ Evangelical leaders like Rev. Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson were quick to call DeGeneres “Ellen Degenerate” and claim that her coming out on the show was a “blatant attempt to promote homosexuality.” Nevertheless, many others also sent her letters thanking her for what she had done. Ellen was the first person to play a lead television character who was openly gay or lesbian.⁶⁷ The fact that she even came out on a mainstream network television show speaks volumes to how tolerance had increased, which also helped contribute to an increased conceptualization of HIV/AIDS as a medical issue. Although not everyone agreed, a large proportion of the population held no ill will toward gay or lesbian individuals. The disease was no longer inherently connected to their sexual orientation nor was the disease a punishment for a lack of morals.

Both the public and government continued to influence how HIV and AIDS were perceived in the 1990s. As discussed, pop culture displayed an increasing humanization of those affected by the disease and an increasing acceptance of gay and lesbian individuals. The government’s actions reflected an increasingly scientific view towards HIV/AIDS. In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act provided protection against discrimination for many disabled Americans, including those who had HIV and AIDS.⁶⁸ In 1995, President Clinton also established the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS, a body designed to advise the

⁶⁵ Kim Painter, “People Less Judgmental, Fearful About AIDS,” *USA TODAY*, 9 Oct. 1997.

⁶⁶ Anne Stockwell, “Ellen’s Gay Games,” *Advocate*, no. 720 (12 Nov. 1996): 59–63.

⁶⁷ Hilary Weaver, “Ellen DeGeneres’s Groundbreaking Coming Out: 20 Years Later,” *Vanity Fair*, 28 April 2017.

⁶⁸ “A Timeline of HIV/AIDS.”

president on current HIV/AIDS research and develop suggestions on how to best implement initiatives that promoted prevention and best provide assistance to those afflicted.⁶⁹ Even with this increased openness to addressing the medical issues surrounding HIV/AIDS, there was still reluctance to accept the group once most afflicted by the disease: gay men. The public view also reflected this sentiment. In 1993, the now infamous “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy was implemented by President Clinton, allowing those who identified as gay or lesbian to serve in the military as long as they stayed silent in regard to revealing their sexual orientation. Although Clinton had campaigned on a promise to end the ban on homosexual individuals in the military, this policy was the closest he came to fully lifting a ban. “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” displays Clinton’s hesitance to deal with still politically dangerous topics and a hesitance to fully accept gay and lesbian individuals into mainstream culture, similar to the general public.⁷⁰ Although sexual orientation was no longer explicitly a moral issue, the fact that Clinton could not meet his campaign promise and instead adopted a half-measure indicated a considerably high level of public animosity towards gay or lesbian individuals. Furthermore, the half measure also demonstrated the strong, persistent influence of conservative and generally highly religious communities. These groups would have seen the issue as a definitively moral one and pushed back with a traditionalist point of view, resulting in the half measure.

Perhaps most influential in the 1990s, however, was the development of the first protease inhibitor in 1995. The first antiretroviral drug, AZT, had been approved in 1987 for use, however, it soon became clear it was not the magic bullet for which scientists searched. Regardless, this new protease inhibitor was more successful than past medicines and would end up leading to highly active antiretroviral therapy. Obviously a landmark moment in the scientific community, the work on antiretroviral therapies also caught national attention and researcher Dr. David Ho was named *TIME Magazine*’s “Man of the Year” in 1996 for his work.⁷¹ These developments also brought further attention to HIV/AIDS as a medical condition. It could be treated like all other medical conditions. One of the

⁶⁹ “Executive Order 12963 of June 14, 1995 Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS,” 16 June 1995.

⁷⁰ Paul F. Horvitz, “‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue’ Is White House’s Compromise Solution: New U.S. Military Policy Tolerates Homosexuals,” *The New York Times*, 20 July 1993.

⁷¹ “A Timeline of HIV/AIDS.”

most impactful shifts in thinking was the transition of HIV/AIDS as a death sentence to that of a chronic condition. With the development of antiretroviral therapy, there was hope for those who previously had none. Powel Kazanjian argues that historians have neglected to examine how the conception of HIV/AIDS has changed as it has become a chronic disease. He identified that there has been a marked shift from the disease as a moral pestilence to looking at it as a virus and disease, however, the effects of the latter require further research.⁷² And even though this perspective has not been fully explored yet, it is clear that in the shift to being seen as a chronic disease, HIV/AIDS had finally lost its status as a plague, at least to the general public and the government.

Religious groups, on the other hand, departed from this perspective. The three most predominant attitudes towards HIV in 1995 were still “apathy, judgement, and fear” according to James R. Ayers. Evangelical communities in particular still believed homosexuality was sinful, and even though some may have felt compassion for AIDS sufferers, they did not necessarily want to help them or care for them.⁷³ Conservative Christian leader Jerry Falwell stated in 1996, “I believe that AIDS...[is] God’s judgment upon the total society for embracing what God has condemned: sex outside of marriage,” and even though this was not particularly blaming gay men, it was still a moral construction of the disease.⁷⁴ Even for those with a less extreme view, HIV/AIDS may have been a problem but not necessarily their problem. In the late 1990s, however, Reverend Franklin Graham, son of famous evangelical Billy Graham began to encourage others to support HIV/AIDS relief. Although he would have influenced evangelical communities, just his influence was not enough.⁷⁵ This continued strong push back against those who identified as gay or lesbian was largely what prevented Clinton from allowing those individuals to openly serve in the military. These attitudes also would have made it more difficult to harness strong overall support in doing more

⁷² Kazanjian, “The AIDS Pandemic in Historic Perspective.”

⁷³ Ayers, “The Quagmire of HIV/AIDS Related Issues Which Haunt the Church.”

⁷⁴ Jennifer E Dyer, “The Politics of Evangelicals: How the Issues of HIV and AIDS in Africa Shaped a ‘Centrist’ Constituency in the United States,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 4 (Dec. 2014): 1010–32.

⁷⁵ Michael H. Merson et al., “The President’s Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief: From Successes Of The Emergency Response To Challenges Of Sustainable Action,” *Health Affairs* 31, no. 7 (1 July 2012): 1380–88.

to address HIV/AIDS. It would take the influence of a popular evangelical president to begin to sway the views of these rather stubborn religious groups.

President George W. Bush catapulted the issue to national and global attention in 2003, launching the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). It pledged \$15 billion over five years to focus on addressing HIV and AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean.⁷⁶ Bush's approach to politics was self-labeled "compassionate conservatism."⁷⁷ He maintained a conservative stance on issues but also applied his evangelical values in the development of policies.⁷⁸ Drawing global attention to AIDS was certainly important, however, Jennifer Dyer argued that Bush was especially important in changing the American public's view of AIDS due to his role as an evangelical.⁷⁹ Earlier when he was campaigning, Bush had used his evangelical background to rally supporters and was considered the "first major politician to emerge from the new milieu of suburban megachurches."⁸⁰ Many evangelicals believed themselves to be in a culture war with liberals, especially during the Clinton presidency. Evangelicals, however, identified with Bush since he too was a conservative evangelical. As a result, they were more inclined to change their view on HIV/AIDS when he advocated for it.

From the start of his presidency, Bush had intended to address HIV/AIDS but struggled to make room for it on the national agenda, advised that it was more important to address terrorism.⁸¹ In March 2001, he took the first steps towards addressing the issue and pledged \$200 million to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. This was later increased to \$500 million, resulting in augmented government spending on foreign aid related to AIDS by 30 percent as compared to the Clinton administration.⁸² Bono of U2 also pushed Bush to take further steps towards addressing HIV/AIDS, appealing to Bush as a fellow

⁷⁶ Dyer, "The Politics of Evangelicals."

⁷⁷ Office of the Press Secretary, "Fact Sheet: Compassionate Conservatism," *The White House*, 30 April 2002, <<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/04/20020430.html>>.

⁷⁸ Franklin Foer, "Running on Their Faith," *U.S. News & World Report* 127, no. 22 (6 Dec. 1999): 26–29.

⁷⁹ Dyer, "The Politics of Evangelicals."

⁸⁰ Foer, "Running on Their Faith."

⁸¹ Tony Carnes and Sarah Pulliam, "Bush's Faith-Based Legacy," *Christianity Today* 53, no. 2 (Feb. 2009): 44–47.

⁸² Jay P. Lefkowitz, "AIDS and the President An Inside Account," *Commentary* 127, no. 1 (Jan. 2009): 24–29.

evangelical. Combining their influence, these two famous evangelicals pushed other evangelicals to change their view on HIV/AIDS. Earlier in 2000, Bono had met with Senator Jesse Helms.⁸³ Previously Helms had opposed helping those with AIDS in any manner on moral grounds, believing that to be gay was a sin, and to him, AIDS was still a gay man's disease.⁸⁴ During the meeting, however, Bono "talked about AIDS as the leprosy of our age" and called Helms to take action against it while referencing the Bible. Miraculously, Helms changed his mind and pledged his support. This shocked onlooker U.S. Representative John Kasich, R-Ohio, to such a degree that he said "[he] thought somebody had spiked [his] coffee." Just two years later, Helms and fellow conservative senator Bill Frist were speaking out about how the government needed to do more about HIV/AIDS.⁸⁵ This would have helped push plans for PEPFAR forward and encouraged other evangelicals to rally to the cause and destigmatize AIDS.

PEPFAR launched with considerable evangelical support behind it given the general animosity towards HIV/AIDS only a few years prior. The implementation of the funding was met with some heated debate, namely over whether the Mexico City Policy, which banned funding to agencies that supported abortions, would apply to PEPFAR funding.⁸⁶ Conservatives and particularly evangelicals strongly supported the Mexico City Policy.⁸⁷ Additionally there was controversy over Bush originally supporting the promotion of condoms for HIV/AIDS prevention. Conservatives strongly opposed this idea. Later, PEPFAR would be adjusted so that condoms and contraception would not be funded for general populations, only high-risk ones.⁸⁸ Despite the controversy that arose, there had been a marked shift in how AIDS was viewed by many evangelicals, one of the major groups holding out with the view that AIDS was a product of sin. It was still a moral problem but the reason had changed. Previously HIV/AIDS had been a moral issue because it was a disease of sinners, but with the turn of the century, HIV/AIDS became a

⁸³ James Traub, "The Statesman," *The New York Times Magazine*, 18 Sept. 2005.

⁸⁴ Simone et al., *The Age of AIDS*.

⁸⁵ Carnes and Pulliam, "Bush's Faith-Based Legacy."

⁸⁶ Lefkowitz, "AIDS and the President An Inside Account"; Erika Casriel, "Promises, Promises," *American Prospect* 15, no. 8 (7 Aug. 2004): 55–57.

⁸⁷ Lefkowitz, "AIDS and the President An Inside Account."

⁸⁸ Leonard S. Rubenstein and Eric A. Friedman, "Human Rights and the President's AIDS Initiative," *Human Rights* 31, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 4–5.

moral issue because it would be morally wrong to ignore those who were suffering. As Dyer put it:

The disease had been transformed. Rather than a ‘gay disease’ it was one of mothers, newborns, and orphans. This was no longer a domestic disease; it was international...[and] the synergy of upstanding, credible conservatives and liberals alike began to reframe the way in which the religious right and other evangelicals thought about the disease.⁸⁹

AIDS had been reconstructed as a problem where the emphasis was placed on mothers and children, especially children orphaned as a result of AIDS, and with that shift, the moral dubiousness of helping those with AIDS was removed. No longer was the issue primarily about helping “sinful” gay men and IV drug users. Instead the cause became worthy to a larger audience. Evangelicals, especially younger ones, began to see the problem in an increasingly medical light, and some even saw a moral imperative to help those in need.⁹⁰ In a Gallup poll in 2009, 38 percent of Americans said that in the previous eight years the country had made progress in combatting AIDS. And despite 19 percent of Americans disagreeing, the overall net opinion was a positive 19 percent in favor of progress.⁹¹ Many evangelicals may also have been slow to change their view if at all, however, Bush’s leadership overall was seen as having contributed positively towards alleviating the suffering caused by HIV/AIDS. General public opinion and religious opinion had diverged in the 1990s, with the public becoming increasingly accepting, but by the turn of the millennium, pop culture and influential figures had convinced many religious groups of the need to support those with HIV/AIDS and the divide between the general public and conservative religious individuals had begun to narrow again.

Since the 1980s, the conceptualization of HIV and AIDS has come a long way. First termed Gay-Related Immunodeficiency Disease and thought of as a punishment for immoral actions, the disease has changed name, and the public has

⁸⁹ Dyer, “The Politics of Evangelicals.”

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Lydia Saad and Jeffrey M. Jones, “Gains Under Bush Seen on AIDS, Race Relations, Little Else,” *Gallup*, 7 Jan. 2009, <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/113680/Gains-Under-Bush-Seen-AIDS-Race-Relations-Little-Else.aspx>>.

changed its view on the subject.⁹² The start of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, however, was frightening and especially hard for groups considered “at risk,” namely gay men and IV drug users. They faced discrimination, and to many people, they became the disease that afflicted them. There was initially a reluctance to talk about the disease on a national level, but by the mid-1980s, things had begun to shift. Reagan finally spoke out about the disease, and Rock Hudson brought it international attention. This initial momentum only compounded as time progressed. With the issue of HIV/AIDS in the news, the public began to hear more perspectives on the disease. Public opinion was often swayed by both pop culture and the presidential administration’s stance, although neither ever completely dominated over the other in influence. Religious groups and evangelicals were in line with the views of the general public at the beginning of the disease’s emergence, however, by the mid-1990s the public had become increasingly tolerant while the religious stance had, for the most part, remained unchanged. It was not until George W. Bush made his address that views in many religious groups began to shift to a meaningful degree, though. It is easy to offer certain key events as reasons for a shift in public opinion, but in reality, it is many of these events compounded with numerous influences that gradually steered the public view of HIV/AIDS from a moral construction to a medical malady.

⁹² Simone et al., *The Age of AIDS*.