The Reagan Administration: How Neglect Became Its Own Genocide

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Introduction

Ronald Reagan is one of the most infamous presidencies in all of American history. His assassination attempt, the War on Drugs, the invasion of Grenada, the notable Berlin Wall speech, and his escalation of the Cold War were only a few things that have cemented Reagan's name as one of the most influential presidents that ever stood within the White House. Although his 8-year term was bloated with (what can be seen as) positive progress, queer people remember his terms differently. Along with Reagan's contributions to the War on Drugs, his lack of contributions to the AIDS crisis made him a villain within the queer community. Although the AIDS crisis affected millions of Americans, HIV disproportionately affected queer men and men of colour (Fitzsimons, 2018). AIDs were first reported in 1981 but it took Reagan until late 1985 to prioritize the epidemic. From years 1981 to 2001, almost 200,000 people, who had been infected through male-to-male sex died from AIDS. This wiped out an entire generation of gay men in the United States (Fitzsimons, 2018). Although the topic of genocide is often about mass violence like the Holocaust, and its deliberate nature to erase a whole people, the AIDS crisis reframes this narrative about genocide. The lack of protection from the Reagan administration inadvertently created a genocide that, to this day, the American queer community still feels the impact of. This essay is meant to expand on the idea that the Reagan administration did cause the genocide of a generation of queer men by using tools normally used in larger forms of mass violence. With that in mind, I can conclude that themes of dehumanization and homophobic, religious rhetoric were used by the Reagan administration during the AIDS epidemic which effectively caused thousands of deaths and still impacts the queer community of the United States today.

Expanding the Definition of Genocide

When exploring topics of genocide, talking about the Holocaust is a good first step in narrowing down what can be deemed as genocide. The Holocaust is deemed as the “ideal-type genocide” as it sparked a new field of genocide studies. In the expansion of genocide studies, the conversation shifted from preventing and researching genocide to areas of political violence (Verdeja, 2012). The methodologies of genocide research have recently been taken over by political scientists and sociologists (Verdeja, 2012). This has led to a new research understanding of genocide as a process, something that had not been a focus in the early iterations of its field. There are complex, historical, and institutional relationships that are at play that are necessary for the theory of genocide. Qualitative data does not dive into key terms like "intentionality," "ideology," "rationality" and "identity" that play a central role in political violence (Verdeja, 2012). With this methodological shift, looking back at historical events with new perspectives is integral to restructuring the current dogma. Events, such as the AIDS crisis, can now be viewed through more critical lenses from queer communities that now have the educational powers to contribute to the existing discourse. Genocide is a multilevel process that incorporates themes and tools such as dehumanization, propaganda, and other actors (Verdeja, 2012). Now that theorists have developed queer epistemologies as well as defined damaging queer rhetoric, it is clear how Reagan’s administration had utilized these genocidal tools in handling the AIDS crisis. Thus, reconstructing the Reagan administration’s response to the AIDS crisis is a necessity as it provides a new, queer lens to genocide studies.

A Brief Timeline of the AIDS Crisis

The earliest report of AIDS came on June 5th, 1981, from a government bulletin called Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (Fitzsimons, 2018). The bulletin stated, “In the period October 1980-May 1981, 5 young men, all active homosexuals, were treated for

biopsy-confirmed Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia at 3 different hospitals in Los Angeles, California. Two of the patients died" (Fitzsimons, 2018). From the beginning, there had been unintentional relationships between gay men and AIDS. It is important to note that this occurred a little over a decade after the Stonewall Riots of 1969 (Fitzsimons, 2018). Although there had been some progress concerning gay rights, the negative stigma around the LGBTQ+ community was prevalent in the mainstream. When the first cases of AIDS were reported in New York and Los Angeles, two cities with prominent gay communities, it was not long before there was a reactionary backlash by anti-gay rights activists (Fitzsimons, 2018). As Ronald Reagan, an ally of the Moral Majority, came into power, he and his administration had long neglected the rising AIDS cases and medical crises that were occurring throughout the United States (Fitzsimons, 2018). The Reagan administration first acknowledged AIDS in a now infamous interview. In 1982, Reagan's press secretary Larry Speakes had been talking to reporters and journalist Lester Kinsolving had this distasteful interaction:

> Lester Kinsolving: Does the president have any reaction to the announcement by the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta that AIDS is now an epidemic in over 600 cases?
>
> Larry Speakes: AIDS? I haven't got anything on it.
>
> Lester Kinsolving: Over a third of them have died. It's known as "gay plague." [Press pool laughter.] No, it is. It's a pretty serious thing. One in every three people that get this have died. And I wonder if the president was aware of this.
>
> Larry Speakes: I don't have it. [Press pool laughter.] Do you?
>
> Lester Kinsolving: You don't have it? Well, I'm relieved to hear that, Larry! [Press pool laughter.]

Larry Speakes: Do you?

Lester Kinsolving: No, I don't.

Larry Speakes: You didn't answer my question. How do you know? [Press pool laughter.]

Lester Kinsolving: Does the president — in other words, the White House — look on this as a great joke?

Larry Speakes: No, I don't know anything about it, Lester. (Lopez, 2016)

From then on, AIDS was viewed as the "gay plague". Two years after that very interview, Reagan's Health and Human Services Secretary announced the development of an AIDS test and hopes for a vaccine within the next two years (Fitzsimons, 2018). The vaccine did not come to fruition within the timeframe provided. It was only in 1985 that Reagan himself finally acknowledged the AIDS crisis after it had come out that over 12,000 Americans had died (Fitzsimons, 2018). Rock Hudson, one of the most famous actors of the current time and Reagan's close friend, unfortunately, died of AIDS (Bennington-Castro, 2020). This sparked public interest, pressuring the Reagan administration to construct an AIDS response (Bennington-Castro, 2020). Although there was some progress in raising AIDS awareness, there were still advocates storming the streets for AIDS awareness up until the mid-90s (Bennington-Castro, 2020). Even then, HIV treatments were only provided to those who could afford them, once again disproportionately affecting poorer communities (Fitzsimons, 2018).

The Reagan Administration's Response: Dehumanization and Neglect

As previously stated, for genocides to occur, there must be a multitude of layers that contribute to its process. One of the largest factors in the death of thousands of AIDS victims can

solely be traced to Reagan's ineptitude to fund research to solve the crisis. There had been reports done by journalist Randy Shilts that was published that showed that Reagan's first term administration refused to fund AIDS programs (Brier, 2009). He goes on to say that the reason his administration's response was lackluster was due to the rise of the New Right (also known as the Republican ascendancy) with Reagan at the forefront (Brier, 2009). The administration believed it was best for a smaller welfare state. This conservative group also went out of its way to demonize homosexuals (Brier, 2009). Reagan's acquisition of power solidified the New Right's moral stance against the LGBTQ+ community as well as drug users. These two communities were the main victims of AIDS and knowing the New Right's beliefs, it makes sense as to why Reagan's administration did not go out of its way to address the crisis.

Furthermore, the aspect of dehumanization plays a large role in why such a tragedy was societally acceptable during Reagan's terms. There are two ways in which the LGBTQ+ community was demonized to the point of no return. First off, there is a religious aspect to how the public and right-wing conservatives see gay men. Referring to the New Right, one of their main values is the importance of traditional family dynamics (Brier, 2009). The LGBTQ+ community supposedly represented everything that is wrong about the evolving definition of family values. Even outside of their love for the same sex, the queer community often goes against the bounds of existing gender norms. Gay men fall under the stereotype of flamboyant and non-masculine, while lesbians are stereotyped as "butches", more masculine figures. Conservative America, much less Reagan, would ever approve of such outlandish presentations of gender. It is to be said that sociologists of that time call anyone who partakes in homosexuality a "deviant" (Kayal, 1985). They do not follow the boundaries of the established social system, thus they become frowned upon marginalized groups.

Moreover, religious conundrums justified bigotry against homosexuals (Kayal, 1985). If God, an omnipotent being, believed that homosexuality was sinful, then the mere existence of queer people is seen as the antithesis of religion (Kayal, 1985). Going against religion warrants very little societal sympathy from a government that panders to Christianity the way the Reagan administration does. Moreover, this also ties into how the government and the media have weaponized sexual gay liberation against queer people. When looking back at the interview between Larry Speakes and Lester Kinsolving, shows the socially accepted bigotry that can be publicly displayed against the queer community. Not only does Speakes call it the "gay plague", spreading misinformation that AIDS is a disease that *only* affects gay people, but he also does it in a manner of mockery (Lopez, 2016). Everyone in that room who was laughing about lives being lost to a health crisis perpetuated harmful, false rhetoric that ultimately normalizes homophobia. Kinsolving mockingly saying, "You don't have it? Well, I'm relieved to hear that, Larry!" insinuates two things: 1) that *of course,* Speakes does not have AIDS, he is a straight, normal person and 2) he's relieved that Speakes does not have sex with men (Lopez, 2016). Both are harmful because it truly boils down to those two things: homosexuals are not deemed normal. After all, they do not follow accepted social behaviours and they are frowned upon due to their sexual behaviours with a man (Epstein, 1994). This is also rooted in Catholicism as homosexual sex is an act of pleasure with no true societal contribution (Epstein, 1994). The topic of sex for pleasure is already frowned upon. The fact that queer sex is not of reproductive means but is a means for people to give into their sexual desires goes against Catholic beliefs (Epstein, 1994). It further pushes the narrative that homosexuals deserve the neglect that they receive because they are inherently sinful, thus completely dehumanizing them as a group. Not only was the Reagan

administration indifferent to the increasing body count, but they also actively promoted and stated anti-gay rhetoric that validated the public's bigotry towards homosexuals.

Conclusion

The Reagan administration has done a lot of damage to how Americans perceive the LGBTQ+ community. Their neglect, blatant bigotry, and propaganda against homosexuals contributed to the genocide of a whole generation of queer people. Restructuring the narrative around genocide and bringing in queer perspectives is necessary for the expansion of genocide studies. Understanding history, looking outside of prevalent voices that rule the existing canon, and finding the voices of marginalized groups are integral, not only for research but for the education of the general public. Being remembered as an influential American president should not dismiss the years of deliberate disregard related to the AIDS crisis. Calling it anything other than genocide deserves to queer people and genocide studies.

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