



Document Set: The Federal Response to AIDS

Instructions: Examine the included documents. Then, as a group, discuss the questions below. Be prepared to share your discussions with the rest of the class.

Questions:

1. Do you notice any individuals, institutions, or organizations that reoccur throughout the timeline (**Document 1**)? What is their significance?
2. Based on **Document 1**, how would you characterize the government's response to the AIDS epidemic? Was it immediate, or more gradual?
3. In **Document 2**, what are the various ways Ronald Reagan announces he will be addressing the AIDS crisis? Why might have some of those strategies evoked a negative reaction among the audience?
4. In **Document 3**, what are some of the ways Sontag describes conservatives like Jesse Helms and Norman Podhoretz responding to the AIDS crisis? How does she argue many political figures responded?
5. In what ways did Reagan's approach to the AIDS crisis, as described in the speech in **Document 2**, align with Sontag's characterization of the way people in power approached AIDS? How did Reagan's approach differ from Sontag's characterization?



Document 1: Timeline 1982-1990

1982	The first congressional hearings on AIDS occur, where it is revealed that an estimated tens of thousands of people may be affected. Legislation to allocate funds for AIDS research is introduced in Congress, but not ratified.
1983	The first bill is passed to fund AIDS research: \$12 million for agencies within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
1984	Governments in New York and San Francisco order bathhouses closed, due to high-risk sexual activities that occur at these sites.
1984	President Ronald Reagan addresses AIDS for the first time, following a question from a journalist about the lack of resources going into fighting the epidemic.
1984	The U.S. Congress approves nearly \$190 million for AIDS research—\$70 million over the Reagan administration's request.
1986	The National Minority AIDS Council (NMAC) is organized. They meet with U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop to discuss concerns related to AIDS in communities of color.
1986	C. Everett Koop personally writes the Surgeon General's Report on AIDS in his home. The matter-of-fact, scientific language on prevention through safer sex practices proves controversial for many who feel that teaching safer sex advocates promiscuity.
1987	The U.S. Public Health Service classifies HIV as a "dangerous contagious disease," thus mandating that all immigrants get tested for the disease. Those who test positive are denied entry into the United States.
1987	President Ronald Reagan makes his first public speech about AIDS, and creates a Presidential commission on AIDS.
1988	Surgeon General C. Everett Koop launches the first national HIV/AIDS education campaign by distributing 107 million copies of an informational booklet. They are printed both in English and Spanish. It is the largest public health mailing in history, and the first time the federal government provided explicit sex information to the public.
1988	President Ronald Reagan signs Health Omnibus Programs Extension (HOPE) Act into law, which authorizes federal funds for AIDS prevention, education, and testing.
1990	The U.S. Congress enacts the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) , which prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities, including people living with HIV/AIDS.
1990	Congress enacts the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency (CARE) Act of 1990, which provides \$220.5 million in Federal funds for HIV community-based care and treatment services.

All information obtained from hiv.gov



Document 2: From President Ronald Reagan's Remarks at the American Foundation for AIDS Research Awards Dinner, 1987

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. It's also important that America not reject those who have the disease, but care for them with dignity and kindness. Final judgment is up to God; our part is to ease the suffering and to find a cure. This is a battle against disease, not against our fellow Americans. We mustn't allow those with the AIDS virus to suffer discrimination. I agree with Secretary of Education Bennett: We must firmly oppose discrimination against those who have AIDS. We must prevent the persecution, through ignorance or malice, of our fellow citizens. [. . .]

As I've said before, the Federal role is to provide scientific, factual information. Corporations can help get the information out, so can community and religious groups, and of course so can the schools, with guidance from the parents and with the commitment, I hope, that AIDS education or any aspect of sex education will not be value-neutral. . . Education is knowing how to adapt, to grow, to understand ourselves and the world around us. And values are how we guide ourselves through the decisions of life. How we behave sexually is one of those decisions. As Surgeon General Koop has pointed out, if children are taught their own worth, we can expect them to treat themselves and others with greater respect. And wherever you have self-respect and mutual respect, you don't have drug abuse and sexual promiscuity, which of course are the two major causes of AIDS. [. . .]

Now, we know there will be those who will go right ahead. So, yes, after there is a moral base, then you can discuss preventives and other scientific measures. And there's another aspect of teaching values that needs to be mentioned here. As individuals, we have a moral obligation not to endanger others, and that can mean endangering others with a gun, with a car, or with a virus. If a person has reason to believe that he or she may be a carrier, that person has a moral duty to be tested for AIDS; human decency requires it. And the reason is very simple: innocent people are being infected by this virus, and some of them are going to acquire AIDS and die.



I've asked the Department of Health and Human Services to determine as soon as possible the extent to which the AIDS virus has penetrated our society and to predict its future dimensions. I've also asked HHS to add the AIDS virus to the list of contagious diseases for which immigrants and aliens seeking permanent residence in the United States can be denied entry.

Audience members: Boo-oo-o!

The President: They are presently denied entry for other contagious diseases. I've asked the Department of Justice to plan for testing all Federal prisoners, as looking into ways to protect uninfected inmates and their families. In addition, I've asked for a review of other Federal responsibilities, such as veterans hospitals, to see if testing might be appropriate in those areas. This is in addition to the testing already underway in our military and foreign service.

Audience members: No! No!

Document 3: From Susan Sontag, "AIDS and its Metaphors" (1988)

...one should hardly be surprised that many want to view AIDS metaphorically—as, plague-like, a moral judgement on society. Professional fulminators can't resist the rhetorical opportunity by sexually transmitted disease that is lethal. Thus, the fact that AIDS is predominantly a heterosexually transmitted illness in the countries where it first emerged in epidemic form has not prevented such guardians of public morals as Jesse Helms and Norman Podhoretz from depicting it as a visitation specially aimed at (and deservedly incurred by) Western homosexuals, while another Reagan-era celebrity, Pat Buchanan, orates about "AIDS and Moral Bankruptcy," and Jerry Falwell offers the generic diagnosis that "AIDS is God's judgement on a society that does not live by His rules." [. . .]

More interesting, because their purposes are more complex, are the secular sponsors of this sort of invective. Authoritarian political ideologies have a vested interest in promoting fear, a sense of the imminence of takeover by aliens—and real diseases are useful material. Epidemic diseases usually elicit a call to ban the entry of foreigners, immigrants. And xenophobic propaganda has always depicted immigrants as bearers of disease (in the late nineteenth century: cholera, yellow fever, typhoid fever, tuberculosis). It seems logical that the political figure in France who represents the most extreme nativist, racist views, Jean-Marie Le Pen, has attempted a strategy of fomenting fear of this new alien peril, insisting that AIDS is not just infectious by contagious, and calling for mandatory nationwide testing and the quarantine of everyone carrying the virus.

Not only is the so-called AIDS virus the quintessential invader from the Third World. It can stand for any mythological menace. . . Denunciation of "the gay plague" are part of a much larger complaint, common among anti-liberals in the West and many exiles from the Russian bloc, about contemporary permissiveness of all kinds: a now-familiar diatribe against the "soft" West, with its hedonism, its vulgar sexy music, its indulgence in drugs, its disabled family life, which have sapped the will to stand up to communism. AIDS is a favorite concern of those who translate their political agenda into questions of group psychology: of national self-esteem and self-confidence.