Hearing AIDS

Sealed with a hiss: Reagan's first speech about AIDS in 1987 was way too little, way too late. His administration's malign neglect spelled death for HIVers, but made Gran Fury's job easy: The presidential puss on an ACT UP poster said it all, while he said nothing, and did less.

May 1, 2001 By Laura Whitehorn

05.31.87

Six years into the epidemic and six and a half into his presidency, on a muggy Washington, DC, night before the start of the Third International Conference on AIDS, in a tent set up for an American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR) benefit dinner, Ronald Reagan made his first speech about AIDS.

In *Reports from the Holocaust* (revised and expanded edition, St. Martin's Press, 1994), Larry Kramer, who broke the audience's polite silence by jeering, wrote: "Reagan's first AIDS speech was received with boos. There were many of us in that audience who sat there listening, waiting for him to say something, anything, of import. It was not enough of a gesture for us that he was just *there*, for which we'd been told we must be grateful.

He did not use the word *gay* or *homosexual* once. He praised heterosexual AIDS service organizations, but he could not say *Gay Men's Health Crisis.* He announced that he was in favor of mandatory testing (the first round of booing), particularly for marriage-license applicants, prisoners and immigrants (the second round of booing), and then he finally sat down (the final cascade of booing). He'd not said one word about *doing* anything positive.

Elizabeth Taylor, who had introduced him and who, word had it, was instrumental in getting this stupid man to address this evening sponsored by the organization of which she is cochair, was obviously embarrassed and attempted to make nice. But Reagan's face told it all. He was not accustomed to being booed in public and he was mad. Dr. Mathilde Krim, amfAR's other cochair, who had stated beforehand that she would walk off the stage if Reagan recommended mandatory testing, stayed put....

There's only one word to describe Reagan's monumental disdain for the dead and dying: *genocide.* AIDS is our holocaust. Tens of thousands of our precious men are dying. Soon it will be hundreds of thousands. AIDS is our holocaust and Reagan is our Hitler."

Fourteen years later, as the U.S. celebrates Reagan's 90th birthday with a move to place his face on the $10 bill, if not Mt. Rushmore, *POZ* remembers those who got infected or died on the watch

of this onetime professional lifeguard.

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