George H.W. Bush Is Not Fondly Remembered by AIDS Activists

If you don't know why, then watch this 1992 video of ACT UP's Ashes Action outside the White House.

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George Herbert Walker Bush died Friday, November 30, on the eve of World AIDS Day. This meant that gushing tributes to the 41st president shared the same news cycle as events marking those lost to AIDS. It's a bitter coincidence that wasn't lost on AIDS activists—notably members of ACT UP—who took the opportunity to recount why they protested Bush Sr., who was president from 1989 to 1993, and his predecessor, Ronald Reagan.

On Facebook, Avram Finkelstein shared an image of a poster he and Vincent Gagliostro created for an ACT UP action in 1990 called Storm the NIH (as in National Institutes of Health). The poster text gives you a good indication of the activists' viewpoint of Bush. "SERIAL KILLER: ONE AIDS DEATH EVERY 12 MINUTES" reads the headline, followed by: "On March 29, President Bush gave his first speech on AIDS…fourteen months since taking office…in that time over 19,535 Americans died from AIDS…one quarter of the 76,631 deaths reported since 1981…his "war on AIDS" funding doesn't even keep up with inflation…the U.S. government is letting people with AIDS fight a war without the weapons needed to win…this is a sham…this is hypocrisy…this is murder."

Over at The Nation, Steven W. Thrasher, a journalist and doctoral candidate who teaches AIDS history, penned an obit titled "It's a Disgrace to Celebrate George H.W. Bush on World AIDS Day."

In addition to linking to an emotional 1992 video of ACT UP's Ashes Action outside the White House (posted above), the article outlines the history of AIDS under the Bush presidency, giving context to activists' viewpoints. "Bush dangerously hid the vast nature of American violence beneath the seductive cloak of civility, that opiate of mass media that gets journalists and readers to let violence go unremarked," Thrasher writes.

"As director of the CIA, vice president, and then president, Bush exacerbated the material conditions that allow AIDS to flourish in the first place. For what causes AIDS? And why has it always so disparately affected black people?"

In the New York Magazine article "History Will Recall, George Bush Did Nothing At All," activist-turned-journalist Garance Franke-Ruta offers her personal recollections of Bush's record and, notably, of an ACT UP protest at the president's vacation home in Kennebunkport, Maine.

She writes: "To speak now, as several have, about the Bush administration's lack of response to the AIDS crisis is not about dishonoring the man's death, but about honoring the deaths of others who were equally beloved to their communities, but far from equal in power, then or now.

"Perhaps if Bush had not died right on the eve of World AIDS Day, the desire to reflect on this aspect of his legacy would have seemed less urgent."

Meanwhile, Peter Staley, another member of ACT UP New York, posted an interview of him and others with TV journalist Charlie Rose, which took place at the end of Bush's term and addressed the AIDS epidemic at that time. Click on the image above to watch that interview.

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