Why Nancy Reagan Refused a Dying Rock Hudson's Plea

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Just weeks before he died of AIDS-related illness in 1985, film icon Rock Hudson asked Nancy Reagan and the White House to help him cut through red tape and see a doctor in France—but the request was refused.

This previously untold detail of an otherwise well-known story was unearthed by the newly restructured Mattachine Society of Washington D.C., which provided authenticated documents for a BuzzFeed News article.

Mark Weinberg, a staffer for the Reagans, told BuzzFeed that the movie star's request was denied because "the Reagans were very conscious of not making exceptions for people just because they were friends of theirs or celebrities or things of that kind. That wasn't—they weren't about that. They were about treating everybody the same."

ACT UP activist Peter Staley found that excuse implausible because the Reagans had personally intervened for other friends. "I'm sure if it had been Bob Hope in that hospital with some rare, incurable cancer, Air Force One would have been dispatched to help save him," Staley said. "There's no getting around the fact that they left Rock Hudson out to dry. As soon as he had that frightening homosexual disease, he became as unwanted and ignored as the rest of us."

Other documents unearthed in the article show that anti-gay opinions prevailed among high-ranking White House staff and that these attitudes flavored the administration's response to the growing epidemic.

When drafting remarks for President Reagan's speech at a fundraising dinner for what's now known as amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research, then-Surgeon General C. Everett Koop suggested Reagan say something compassionate: "It's also important that America not judge those who have the disease but care for them with dignity and kindness."

But this was not acceptable to Reagan's special assistant Carl Anderson. In a White House memo, he writes: "Failure to make moral judgments on this behavior is why we have this epidemic. To my knowledge, the President has never said that we are to abandon moral judgment on these types of matters."

For the speech, Reagan took Anderson’s advice and cut the line about not judging those with the disease.

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