Outing the NYT Ed Koch Obit

February 4, 2013 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Ed Koch

Ed Koch, the former mayor of New York City, has died. He was 88. The only time I ever met him was at a press conference in the late 1980s. I was an undergrad at New York University studying journalism. He was there to answer questions from the student press.

I never got to ask a question, but I did hear a question that I had never before heard asked of a politician and certainly never heard answered: “Are you gay?” was the question. The answer: “No, next question.”

Although Koch said those words with a smirk on his face, his tone was noncombative. He looked at no one in particular as he answered, pointing randomly to the crowd to get a quick question that would change the subject.

What strikes me the most about that moment is that his answer in public never changed. Despite his support for LGBT rights, activists have pointed to his closeted life as one of the reasons he didn’t do enough for AIDS. Perhaps Koch was a ninja expert at keeping his heterosexuality in the closet, but I would argue the testimony of countless credible sources that he was gay is overwhelming.

While this is all old news to me, I was struck today by a straight colleague who said casually that he had never even heard of the Koch-is-gay stuff until now. Just goes to show how some issues are more relevant to some of us than others. And there’s nothing unusual about that.

That phenomenon explains why many folks, even former adversaries of Koch, praised his accomplishments in the wake of his death while others were disturbed by a seemingly deliberate omission of discussion about his inaction in the early days of the AIDS pandemic.

It’s not my style to dance on graves. I don’t want my loved ones to be hurt by any dancing on my grave, so on this matter I remain a Golden Rule adherent. That said, I do not consider discussing Koch’s inaction on AIDS in and of itself as dancing on his grave.

He was a public figure. As such, scrutiny of his public record isn’t personal, it’s a matter of public concern. And journalists especially shouldn’t shy away from telling the facts of the lives of public people, especially in their obituaries.

The New York Times obituary of Koch originally did just that. The Huffington Post reports that the word “AIDS” was mentioned only once in the first version of the NYT obit, which was 5,500 words long, in a reference to “the scandals and the scourges of crack cocaine, homelessness and AIDS.”

A few hours later three paragraphs about his handling of AIDS were added, but the NYT wrote that “hundreds of New Yorkers were desperately ill or dying” in the 1980s when in fact it was tens of thousands. Even in its attempts at correcting the record, the NYT fell short. As of this writing, that incorrect fact has not been updated.

Some activists go as far as to accuse Koch of murder because of his inaction on AIDS, but that is too far for me. Discussing his inaction on AIDS, however, shouldn’t be too far for anyone.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/outing-nyt-ed-koch-obit