

Pandemic Politics with a Side of Pandemonium:
The Politicization of HIV/AIDS in American Cultural Discourse, 1981-2001

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“I am not happy that I am sick. I am not happy that I have AIDS. But if that is helping others, I can at least know my own misfortune has had some positive worth.”

When Rock Hudson wrote those words to be read at a Los Angeles fundraiser against AIDS, he knew he had precious little time to make an impact.¹ Hudson, a masculinity-typifying Hollywood idol of the 1970s and 1980s, had been diagnosed with acquired immune deficiency syndrome in 1984.² When the public learned of his diagnosis in 1985, AIDS had been first recognized in California four years prior and existed firmly as a “gay plague” in the eyes of most Americans. Hudson passed away on October 2, 1985 — only weeks after the quote was read, and too early for his legacy to survive the mark of AIDS (and by association, his hidden homosexuality). Because of AIDS, Hudson would never be remembered the way his better-known contemporaries’ and co-stars’ (including Elizabeth Taylor and Doris Day) are. However, the impact his diagnosis and passing left on American policymaking, political discourse, and cultural development endure to the present day. Hudson’s death represented a turning point for AIDS’s image to the public. Hudson’s position as a masculine archetype in American popular culture broadened the cultural significance of AIDS,³ and, months after Hudson’s diagnosis, President Reagan — who had quietly led a country affected by AIDS for four years beforehand — publicly recognized the disease’s existence for the first time. In the following years, the Reagan administration took the federal government’s first policy actions to limit the spread and deadliness of the AIDS pandemic.

Today, AIDS remains associated with the minority groups it impacted most severely, such as the queer community in San Francisco. For the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations that led the United States from the discovery of AIDS to the 21st century, academic analyses vary on a largely partisan basis.⁴ Analyses of the AIDS pandemic focus on AIDS as a political issue, reflecting on minority groups’ experiences with AIDS through the lens of external social dynamics rather than investigating the impacts

¹ Matt Bomer, “His AIDS Diagnosis Was Front-page News for Almost Every Major U.S. Newspaper in the Summer of 1985,” Foundation for the AIDS Monument, <https://aidsmonument.org/remember/matt-bomer-rock-hudson/>.

² Tracy Smith, “Rock Hudson: The Public and Private Lives of a Gay Hollywood Idol,” *CBS Sunday Morning* (New York, NY), June 25, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/rock-hudson-the-public-and-private-lives-of-a-gay-hollywood-idol/>.

³ Smith, “Rock Hudson: The Public and Private Lives of a Gay Hollywood Idol,” 2023.

⁴ Peter Huber, “Ronald Reagan’s Quiet War on AIDS,” *City Journal*, 2016, <https://www.city-journal.org/article/ronald-reagans-quiet-war-on-aids>.

of the politicization of AIDS itself, including on minority communities' internal politics.⁵ In actuality, the politicization of the AIDS virus, pandemic, and response throughout the United States during the 1980s and 1990s — and the disparate impacts on minority groups it caused — drove the development of cultural discourse and demographic subcultures throughout the United States.

Section One: Interactions Between Federal Policy and Political Discourse

Presidents and presidential administrations play perhaps the most significant role in guiding political discourse in the United States, but even they made political considerations and concessions concerning AIDS and AIDS response.

For the Reagan administration, disease response was initially almost entirely a political issue, as the cultural connotations of the disease and other Reagan policies shaped AIDS response throughout Reagan's presidency. When AIDS was first diagnosed in 1981, Ronald Reagan had just been sworn in as president of the United States.⁶ Reagan's strict socially conservative views — shared by many in his administration — rendered AIDS a less-than serious problem, resulting in inadequate response to the disease. The White House repeatedly dismissed Reporter Lester Kinsolving, who regularly pressed the administration on AIDS and its lack of response, throughout the early 1980s.⁷ AIDS became the subject of humor for the White House press pool, as reporters like Kinsolving were consistently mocked for questioning the administration's lackluster approach, including by Larry Speakes, Reagan's White House Press Secretary until 1987.⁸ Further, White House officials could not confirm that they had so much as asked Reagan about AIDS, or that he had expressed any opinions on the crisis whatsoever.⁹ Though Reagan did authorize some spending on AIDS, cuts to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

⁵ Carol Levine, *American Journal of Sociology* 92, no. 6 (1987): 1515–18.

⁶ Huber, "Ronald Reagan's Quiet War on AIDS," 2016.

⁷ German Lopez, "The Reagan Administration's Unbelievable Response to the HIV/AIDS Epidemic," Vox (Vox, December 1, 2016), <https://www.vox.com/2015/12/1/9828348/ronald-reagan-hiv-aids>.

⁸ Lopez, "The Reagan Administration's Unbelievable Response to the HIV/AIDS Epidemic," 2016.

⁹ Abdallah Fayyad, "The LGBTQ Health Clinic That Faced a Dark Truth about the AIDS Crisis," *The Atlantic*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2019/07/us-aids-policy-lingering-epidemic/594445/>.

(CDC) and National Institutes of Health (NIH) severely impeded AIDS response efforts.¹⁰ CDC epidemiologist Don Francis described the funding as “inadequate, “restricting [the CDC’s] work” to the extent that the administration’s inaction had “presumably deepened the invasion of [AIDS] into the American population.”¹¹ This changed in the aftermath of Rock Hudson’s passing. Reagan “never knew [Hudson] too well,” but AIDS’s impact on a figure he knew personally deeply affected the president.¹² As a result, Reagan expressed his first interest in the nature of the disease, and the number of White House documents referencing AIDS rose significantly.¹³ To Reagan’s credit, qualified FDA appointees made strides in developing disease-response strategies even before Reagan’s personal views on AIDS softened;¹⁴ Reagan’s surgeon general, Dr. Charles Everett Koop, developed new “treatment-investigation” policies, declining to enforce strict drug trial rules to “accelerate patient access to desperately needed drugs” compared to existing frameworks.¹⁵ However, these changes were largely optical. While the Reagan Food and Drug Administration shifted its focus to combating AIDS in name, the low funding levels prescribed to it through Reagan’s signature fiscal policy of Reaganomics translated to few material actions the FDA could take.¹⁶ As a result, the Reagan administration’s conservative policy positions — even on issues not directly related to AIDS or homosexuality — prevented it from taking further action to prevent and address the spread of AIDS.

President Clinton’s approach to AIDS was more rigorous from its beginning — but the disease’s transformation into a topic of mainstream political discourse limited many of Clinton’s efforts to optical ones, not unlike those emblematic of the Reagan administration. The Clinton administration, which began in January 1993 after the four-year presidency of Andover alumnus George H. W. Bush, took office as the

¹⁰ Aran Ron and David E. Rogers, “AIDS in the United States: Patient Care and Politics,” *Daedalus* 118, no. 2 (1989): 41-58.

¹¹ PBS FRONTLINE, “The Age of AIDS: A Plea for More Funding,” [www.pbs.org](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/aids/docs/francislea.html), May 30, 2006, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/aids/docs/francislea.html>.

¹² Ronald Reagan, “Diary Entry — 07/24/1985,” The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute, July 24, 1985, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/white-house-diaries/diary-entry-07241985>.

¹³ Andrew Johns, *A Companion to Ronald Reagan* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 2015), 221.

¹⁴ Huber, “Ronald Reagan’s Quiet War on AIDS,” 2016.

¹⁵ Huber, “Ronald Reagan’s Quiet War on AIDS,” 2016.

¹⁶ Ron, “AIDS in the United States: Patient Care and Politics,” 47.

first Democratic presidential administration in 12 years.¹⁷ Though the administration's "third-way" governing philosophy was more economically centrist than previous Democratic presidents', Clinton's views on social issues were more progressive than those of Reagan or Bush, positioning his administration to take a more proactive view against AIDS, especially considering its widespread association with homosexuality.¹⁸ Initially, Clinton lived up to this; funding for AIDS research, treatment, and care increased dramatically under his presidency¹⁹ and the inclusion of the NAMES project AIDS memorial quilt in Clinton's inauguration and its displaying at the National Mall represented a slowly growing acceptance of homosexuals and sympathy towards AIDS victims,²⁰ as did the presentation of artist Loel Poor's photo essays on AIDS victims.²¹ However, after congressional Democrats' defeat in the 1994 midterm elections, Clinton's AIDS approach made significant concessions to more conservative voices. Donna Shayla, Secretary of Health and Human services under President Clinton, claimed [Clinton] decided not to [lift Reagan-era needle-exchange rules] for political reasons," fearing that Democrats might appear "soft on drugs" if it funded needle-exchange programs — despite Clinton's FDA, CDC, and NIH appointees urging him to do so.²² Ironically, Clinton's FDA appointees did not continue Dr. Koop's push for treatment-investigation policies to develop into more comprehensive treatment plans, either.²³ Thus, though the Clinton administration's more nominally liberal politics did translate to more rigorous efforts against AIDS, political considerations continued to constrain federal AIDS response efforts. Overall, despite presidential administrations' influence over AIDS response policies and their prominent position in political discourse, the development of federal positions mirrored and adjusted according to political issues of the day.

¹⁷ Fayyad, "The LGBTQ Health Clinic That Faced a Dark Truth about the AIDS Crisis," 2019.

¹⁸ Fayyad, "The LGBTQ Health Clinic That Faced a Dark Truth about the AIDS Crisis," 2019.

¹⁹ Fayyad, "The LGBTQ Health Clinic That Faced a Dark Truth about the AIDS Crisis," 2019.

²⁰ National AIDS Memorial, "The History of the Quilt," www.aidsmemorial.org (National AIDS Memorial, 2021), <https://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt-history>.

²¹ Loel Poor, *Memories of Eddie: Living with AIDS*, 1993. Photographs.

²² Fayyad, "The LGBTQ Health Clinic That Faced a Dark Truth about the AIDS Crisis," 2019.

²³ Huber, "Ronald Reagan's Quiet War on AIDS," 2016.

Section Two: Effectiveness of and Disparities in AIDS Response

When President Clinton was inaugurated in 1993, AIDS had claimed the lives of some 200,000 Americans across all demographic categories — but AIDS’s impact was particularly pronounced among the African American and queer communities.

Though AIDS is (and has historically been) associated almost singularly with the queer community, its disproportionate impacts on African Americans are also striking, and largely attributable to political and cultural concerns. African Americans represented only 12% of the American population in the 1990s, but roughly 40% of US AIDS cases.²⁴ Throughout the 1980s, a series of internal and external factors rendered AIDS a strong taboo in most African American spaces; the war on drugs,²⁵ African-American religiosity, and the popular cultural image of AIDS victims as almost exclusively white male homosexuals.²⁶ Firstly, AIDS’s association with transmission through intravenous drug use, compounded with the disease’s higher deadliness against poorer Americans, designated African Americans a major AIDS “risk group,” complete with much of the stigma the designation entailed for queer Americans.²⁷ One example of this association with drugs is *Risky Times: How to be AIDS-Smart and Stay Healthy*. The title represents a more socially progressive guide for AIDS prevention for teenagers, but contains numerous testimonies about the dangers of drug use specifically — a political issue very much tangled up with race in many Americans’ political understanding.²⁸ “Understanding AIDS,” a pamphlet issued by the Reagan CDC, follows this pattern of lamenting drug use in relation to AIDS without considering systemic reasons for communities’ risk of substance abuse.²⁹ The status of drugs and crime as defining political issues in the 1980s and 1990s made these negative associations

²⁴ David McBride, *From TB to AIDS: Epidemics Among Urban Blacks Since 1900* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).

²⁵ Ron, “AIDS in the United States: Patient Care and Politics,” 44.

²⁶ Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

²⁷ Ron, “AIDS in the United States: Patient Care and Politics,” 43.

²⁸ Ron, “AIDS in the United States: Patient Care and Politics,” 44.

²⁹ Charles Everett Koop, *Understanding AIDS* (Rockville, Md: Department of Health & Human Services, Public Health Service, Centers for Disease Control, 1988).

worse, and this pattern's existing influence on racial tensions across the nation.³⁰ Additionally, high religiosity and the influence of religious leadership figures in African American communities contributed to the spread of AIDS within them; because the disease had been introduced to Americans as a "gay plague,"³¹ Black religious leaders often hesitated to acknowledge AIDS's impact on their communities.³² At the time, most strongly Christian Americans viewed homosexuality as sinful, and this association was particularly damning in the African American community, where faith leaders took on roles of social influence as well.³³ Religiosity also intensified the idea that AIDS was a punishment for the sin of homosexuality, shaming AIDS victims and dissuading would-be allies.³⁴ Finally, the popular image of AIDS as a disease of white male homosexuals strengthened the stigma against the disease and its victims in predominantly African American spaces, and left many Black Americans simply unprepared for the damage it could cause to their communities.³⁵ Thus, internal cultural and external political factors were the driving forces behind disparities in AIDS and treatment outcomes for the African American community.

It is perhaps needless to say that the disease's impacts on queer Americans — and the impacts of political discourse entangled therein — are even clearer. The association between AIDS and the queer community needs no introduction; indeed, the disease has been linked to queer America for longer than it has been understood as its own illness.³⁶ The cultural connection between HIV/AIDS and homosexuality pervades American cultural discourse so deeply that it took one Dr. Anthony Fauci's 1983 research on AIDS's potential impact on heterosexual Americans for the general population to view the disease as a credible threat.³⁷ Political discourse from every side tied HIV/AIDS to the queer community, and almost

³⁰ The Lancet HIV, "The War on Drugs Is Incompatible with the Fight against HIV," *The Lancet HIV* 6, no. 5 (May 2019), [https://doi.org/10.1016/s2352-3018\(19\)30112-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/s2352-3018(19)30112-2).

³¹ Fayyad, "The LGBTQ Health Clinic That Faced a Dark Truth about the AIDS Crisis," 2019.

³² Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*, 1999.

³³ Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*, 1999.

³⁴ Ron, "AIDS in the United States: Patient Care and Politics," 45.

³⁵ Richard Seltzer and Robert C. Smith, "Racial Differences and Intra-racial Differences Among Blacks in Attitudes Toward AIDS", *AIDS and Public Journal* 3 (1988): 31-35.

³⁶ HIV.gov, "A Timeline of HIV and AIDS," HIV.gov (HIV.gov, 2022), <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline#year-1981>.

³⁷ Ron, "AIDS in the United States: Patient Care and Politics," 45.

exclusively to homosexual men. Perhaps the most infamous argument against proactive AIDS response policies in American history has been the view that the disease represented “the wrath of God visited upon the homosexuals”³⁸ — a prejudice that figures as influential as Reagan White House Press Secretary Larry Speakes echoed repeatedly.³⁹

Turning back to *Risky Times* and a different side of political discourse, despite the guide’s later 1990 publication date and professed inclinations towards “understanding and trustworth[iness],” it implies that deceptive bisexual men are at fault for the spread of AIDS among heterosexual Americans.⁴⁰ Moreover, the internal politics of the queer movement also hampered efforts to contain HIV/AIDS. Most significantly, a sense of distrust had developed among the queer community for centralized governmental intervention of any sort during the gay liberation movement of the 1970s, and this sentiment initially extended to an aversion to pursuing or complying with federal means of combating AIDS.⁴¹ This, in turn, decreased the federal government’s impetus to take action against AIDS for the first few years of the pandemic’s course. Extreme suggestions about AIDS response strategies, which ranged from permanently tattooing AIDS victims to forcing them to live in colonies separate from society, further intensified widespread queer distrust of broader AIDS response initiatives.⁴² Therefore, the disease’s disparate impact on queer Americans is partly attributable to the external politicization of HIV/AIDS in the United States, the internal political considerations of the queer community, and interactions between the two parallel systems of discourse.

Section Three: Cultural Impacts of AIDS Disease, Response, and Politicization

Politics and policy responding to HIV/AIDS had a direct impact on the broader American cultural mainstream, but left their most pronounced impact on the development of the minority subcultures the

³⁸ Caro Levine, *American Journal of Sociology*, 1987.

³⁹ Lopez, “The Reagan Administration’s Unbelievable Response to the HIV/AIDS Epidemic,” 2016.

⁴⁰ Jeanne Blake, *Risky Times: How to Be AIDS-Smart and Stay Healthy: A Guide for Teenagers* (New York: Workman Publishing, 1990), 16.

⁴¹ Ron, “AIDS in the United States: Patient Care and Politics,” 45.

⁴² Ron, “AIDS in the United States: Patient Care and Politics,” 46.

pandemic affected most — represented perhaps most authentically by the queer community of San Francisco.

Firstly, AIDS's position in American political discourse left a still notable — if less pronounced — impact on the broader cultural mainstream. Fears of and misinformation surrounding the disease and pandemic represented significant cultural forces, which the mere fact of the existence of *Risky Times* and “Understanding AIDS” demonstrate clearly; with the former addressed to American teenagers and the latter distributed to over 60% of the US population,⁴³ the breadth of these informational documents' reach calls to an America blindsided by a pandemic it was utterly unprepared for. Nevertheless, the real story of AIDS in the American cultural mainstream is a story of a disease dismissed for as long as most Americans viewed ostracized ethnic and sexual minorities as its only risk categories — but associated in retrospect almost exclusively with those minority groups, all the same.⁴⁴ AIDS may not have developed mainstream American culture as it did American subcultures, but it reveals a key pattern about it nonetheless; the American mainstream failed to act on AIDS while it affected nearly only minority communities, blamed the disease it had refused to address on those same communities, elevated political capital above human life in calculated administrative decisions, and even in hindsight continued this association while all too often failing to recognize its own part in the injustice. In a sense, AIDS showed us the ways American culture failed Americans, and the patterns we must avoid to prevent that repeating. Clearly, though often understated, AIDS left a significant impact on mainstream American cultural discourse.

On the other hand, AIDS politics and policy had a direct impact on the development of minority subcultures across the United States, exemplified by that of the queer community in San Francisco. When AIDS struck the United States in 1981, San Francisco was one of the first places the disease impacted —

⁴³ Joshua Vorhees, “C. Everett Koop’s Legacy May Be This Seven-Page AIDS Pamphlet,” *Slate Magazine*, 2018, http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2013/02/26/c_everett_koop_understanding_aids_former_surgeon_general_came_a_hero_to.html.

⁴⁴ Ron, “AIDS in the United States: Patient Care and Politics,” 45.

and one of the best equipped to handle it.⁴⁵ Though HIV/AIDS hit San Francisco's gay men harder than it did any other community in the world, the city's outcomes in containing the disease were unmatched.⁴⁶ This is attributable to San Francisco's status as one of the few locations in the United States where queer Americans held political power;⁴⁷ as early as the 1970s, the city had elected the openly gay Harvey Milk to its Board of Supervisors and had already developed notoriety for its influential queer community.⁴⁸ Gay migration to the city and a historically tolerant tradition compounded the political power of an already organized and mobilized gay voting block, which represented a core constituency of some 20% of San Francisco voters even prior to the outbreak of AIDS.⁴⁹ Though San Francisco struggled with the same elevated AIDS impacts on African Americans and other racial minorities, the city's unique gay political establishment secured policies from the beginning of the crisis in the early 1980s.⁵⁰ In San Francisco, the influence of the queer community made AIDS victims' association with them less stigmatized, while actually aiding those individuals in healthcare outcomes and community support. AIDS galvanized the queer community in San Francisco, both driving local policymakers and filling in the gaps before government could, as San Franciscan community activists spread awareness about AIDS through posters, brochures, and educational foundations from the pandemic's first days.⁵¹ In fact, by 1983, the city of San Francisco allotted more funding for AIDS response than the sum total of the Reagan NIH's national response.⁵² Overall, grassroots community organization decided the efficacy of San Francisco's AIDS

⁴⁵ HIV.gov, "A Timeline of HIV and AIDS," 2022.

⁴⁶ Mitchell Katz, "AIDS Epidemic in San Francisco among Men Who Report Sex with Men: Successes and Challenges of HIV Prevention," *JAIDS Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes* 14 (1997): S38, https://journals.lww.com/jaids/fulltext/1997/00002/aids_epidemic_in_san_francisco_among_men_who.8.aspx.

⁴⁷ Ron, "AIDS in the United States: Patient Care and Politics," 46.

⁴⁸ Katz, "AIDS Epidemic in San Francisco among Men Who Report Sex with Men: Successes and Challenges of HIV Prevention," 1997.

⁴⁹ Katz, "AIDS Epidemic in San Francisco among Men Who Report Sex with Men: Successes and Challenges of HIV Prevention," 1997.

⁵⁰ Katz, "AIDS Epidemic in San Francisco among Men Who Report Sex with Men: Successes and Challenges of HIV Prevention," 1997.

⁵¹ Katz, "AIDS Epidemic in San Francisco among Men Who Report Sex with Men: Successes and Challenges of HIV Prevention," 1997.

⁵² Katz, "AIDS Epidemic in San Francisco among Men Who Report Sex with Men: Successes and Challenges of HIV Prevention," 1997.

response more than any other factor — and the city's queer community rallied, pushed for change, and remained stronger accordingly.

Today, most Americans view HIV/AIDS as an issue and a straightforward cultural force constrained to the 1980s and 1990s. However, the politicization of AIDS during that period — and the resulting disparate politicization, both internal and external, that the groups most targeted and represented in that stage of cultural dialogue around AIDS experienced — left a clear and lasting impact on the development of national AIDS discourse and of demographic subcultural communities in particular. The community that developed in response to AIDS in San Francisco represents a clear example of this, as grassroots organizers and everyday Americans responded to a crisis threatening their neighbors by strengthening their disease response efforts and responsibilities at a pace and efficacy that neither the federal government nor other local governments could match. The Rock Hudsons and Ronald Reagans of the world left their impacts on AIDS politics and policy, but none so effective or as durable as what a community united in defense of its most vulnerable achieved. The association between minority cultures and AIDS endures today alongside the Black and queer communities whose development it influenced in San Francisco and across the nation. The AIDS Memorial Quilt, the photo displays of Loel Poor, and the minority cultures across our country today remain as signs of a nation still shaped by the internal and external politics of AIDS in minority movements. The politicization of the AIDS pandemic and response from 1981 to 2001 changed American cultural discourse and forever altered the development of minority subcultures across the nation.

A Note from the Author

When I was a kid growing up in early-2010s San Francisco, I'd never heard of Rock Hudson, Charles Koop, or HIV/AIDS before — but I had learned about Rosa Parks, Cesar Chavez, and Harvey Milk. Those three (among several others) were the focus of our kindergarten “Changemakers” unit. Though I might have known those folks as Changemakers while a child, I think I'd describe those people as civil rights activists today.

In 1977, Harvey Milk became the first openly queer elected official in San Francisco, California, and would remain for decades (arguably to this day) the best-known openly queer politician in American history. In 2004 (and then again in 2008 after back-and-forth State Supreme Court decisions on same-sex marriage legality), Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon became the first married gay couple in San Francisco, and in the United States at large. In 2012, California became the first state to ban conversion therapy. The legality of same-sex marriage across the state changed several times per court decisions and ballot referenda, but a 2013 court ruling — reinforced in 2015 by the federal *Obergefell* ruling and in 2024 by a legislatively referred amendment to the California Constitution — has permitted same-sex marriage since then.

If California has been at the forefront of the struggle for queer rights, San Francisco has been at the center. As a city spearheading the struggles of — and thoroughly identified with — gay men more than perhaps any other minority group through the 1970s, San Francisco was hit hard and early by HIV/AIDS when the disease emerged in 1981. Yet despite the national political climate and the concentration of queer Americans in San Francisco, the city's community came together to support victims and fight the disease remarkably effectively. Even when local, state, and federal intervention fell short, everyday grassroots organizers made the city I grew up in the place that would go on to house the National AIDS Memorial.

The San Francisco I grew up in revered people who made change, from Martin Luther King to migrant farm labor activists. Our education on Harvey Milk enshrined the queer community as one of those groups with change worth fighting for, as we grew up in a city concurrently leading the legal charge on marriage equality and other queer rights. I'm drawn to this topic because to me, living in my city means continuing to pursue struggles whose associated communities are worth fighting for. HIV/AIDS built communities in my city, not only between homosexual white men (as is most commonly imagined) but between San Franciscans of many identities, tied together in a fight for their community's health.

Although I hope my readers gain a more nuanced understanding of the AIDS pandemic and the politicization of health issues as a broader theme, it's equally important to me that this paper imparts a sense of the immediate power and long-term value of community organization. Even when facing a recently discovered deadly disease, with few resources and little outside support, grassroots organization in my community saved lives. The cultural and political contexts and forces are important, but I hope my analysis captures the role of community in equal regard.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for supporting me on my academic and research journey for this project and all the projects that led up to it. I would like to thank Mr. Parker for connecting me with *Risky Times*, a valuable primary source that helped inform my paper, as well as referring me to the works of artists like Loel Poor, who did their part in the fight against AIDS by promoting community awareness through their work.

Most importantly, I want to express my gratitude and admiration to the innumerable advocates, community organizers, and everyday Americans who fought for their neighbors' health, rights, and humanity through AIDS and every other crisis our nation has faced. AIDS care is health care, queer rights are human rights, and the community united in support and recognition of those principles are the civil rights activists — are the *Changemakers* — who made our country great and who fight to make it better every day. This paper is dedicated to all of those Americans; our country owes them a debt that can never be repaid. America promises to be one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. Our Changemakers have kept that promise. Perhaps one day, this project and others like it can begin to help the rest of our nation do the same — So help us God.

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