

# **AIDS and COVID: The American Tradition of Ignoring Contagious Diseases**

## **by Boran Göher**

40 years ago, in 1981, the first signs of a deadly epidemic were observed in the United States of America. Caused by HIV, which was just starting to gain prominence at that time, AIDS was first detected by American health officials in the summer of 1981. The severity of the disease was obvious, yet the American response to the increasing proliferation of the disease amongst the American people was underwhelming, to say the least. The media coverage of the issue was spotty and often erroneous, the issue failing to get front-page coverage in prominent newspapers for years, and being covered in interesting (for the lack of a better word) ways such as being called a “rare cancer seen in homosexuals”. [\(1\)](#) One other significant group that chose to largely ignore the endemic was the presidential administration of the time. This was in no small part caused by the man at the top himself, the infamous 40th President of the United States, Ronald Reagan. AIDS was not even mentioned by Reagan until 4 years later in 1985, and serious steps only began to be taken in 1987. [\(2\)](#)

Those things are common knowledge now, but how do we tie them to issues of our time? America is also facing a deadly and contagious virus outbreak right now, and I think that a few elements of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic somewhat resemble the response to AIDS forty years prior. There is the simplest case to be made in how America is ignoring a deadly disease at the top level, both with Reagan’s response to AIDS and with Trump’s response to COVID (or perhaps we should say lack of a response), which does work on an elementary level, but leaving the argument this simple would distort the parallels to be something that they are not. There are many facets of the two situations that do not match up. For example, we know that the COVID situation will last much shorter as we now have multiple working vaccines and people all around the world are starting to get vaccinated. AIDS was ignored for six years as a major threat. COVID will likely be a distant memory six years from its discovery. Another discrepancy is how Donald Trump lost the Presidential race, with no small thanks to his mishandling of the pandemic, whereas Ronald Reagan had gotten a second term, unbothered by AIDS. But we are not trying to make a complete analogy, we will only highlight the similarities and try to draw a conclusion from those similarities.

First of all, why were these crises ignored in the first place? Or were they really ignored? If we look at the AIDS case, it is much easier to describe governmental actions as straight-up ignorance, but if you have been following the news at all for the past year, you will know how much of a hot topic the pandemic has been. Can we really say that America ignored COVID despite all the noise? My answer is yes, but the two types of ignorance are not the same. AIDS was outright ignored in the sense that people avoided talking about it. With the recent pandemic, the topic was always on the plate, but it did not do much in the way of a solution. Indeed, the “solution” that the Trump administration reached was to ignore the problem. It was not ignored in the sense that nobody was talking about it, but in the sense that all those talks resulted in nothing, effectively. For both these situations, we can say that the American

Government ignored the health and safety side of the problem, but there were parts of the problem that were highlighted and for not very benevolent reasons.

A good place to start approaching this problem is to recall a specific phrase that Donald Trump used very frequently, namely: "Chinese Virus". Despite the warnings from officials and political opponents, Trump continued to use the polarizing term amongst worries of increasing sinophobia. And that is precisely one of the sides of the pandemic Trump administration did not ignore. Donald Trump often used the Chinese origins of the virus in order to generate enmity towards China and to increase popularity in the polls by creating an imaginary enemy. Many people noted how this language would contribute to the so-called "yellow peril", an increasingly popular sentiment amongst Americans formed initially by various pieces of misinformation and general racism against Chinese people. (3) It fed beautifully into the general narrative of the war against China that Trump waged, with the earlier trade war and verbal hostilities becoming a platform for this new war against the image of the Chinese, at least from the perspective of Donald Trump.

So, in short, we can say that Trump used the association of the virus with the Chinese in order to spin the pandemic in a manner that would satisfy and expand his voter base all the while ignoring the real danger. You should already be able to see where I am getting with this, so let us get there. Why was the AIDS crisis ignored? Well, before anything else, the main reason is that it was ignorable. The truth is that AIDS was a threat to all Americans, but since the proliferation of the disease was largely centred around homosexual men, the public thought that it could only affect homosexual men, which meant that Ronald Reagan was free to ignore it (homosexual men were not exactly in a respectable position within society at the time, as you can imagine). And even when they did not ignore it, they made fun of it, erupting at laughter at thought of a "gay plague". (4) You could not show outright antagonism toward your own citizens as the president, so Trump-style fearmongering was not an option, but showing support would make it seem that you were on "their side", and in the eighties, it seemed that nobody wanted to be in the same side as the homosexual people. Besides, researching the disease, informing the public, providing the necessary funds to hospitals and laboratories were expensive. Not too expensive for the U.S government by any means, but it would have required potentially hundreds of millions of dollars and why spend that kind of money on "the gays" when you could be funnelling it to white old men who already have more money than they know what to do with, or perhaps be using it in order to distribute drugs among low-income neighbourhoods in inner-cities to further your political ambitions?

We have raised a new point, it seems. The Reagan administration ignored the epidemic because they could, in a sense. Can we say the same for Trump and his administration? I think so. One reason COVID has not been taken seriously by the top class of Americans is that it sits right in that zone of problems where rich white men are not very likely to be harmed by it despite it being really harmful to people in general, like climate change, for example. Those people are the key in both problems. They thought they could avoid AIDS (by the virtue of not being homosexual) and thought they could avoid COVID (via their various privileges, like being able to isolate at any time in any manner) or at least not suffer permanent harm. And if you are the American president, and those people are convinced that they are not going to be harmed, you are free to ignore any problem on your hand, and so long as you handle your public relations moves regarding the problem correctly, you will not even be losing voters, in fact, you might even gain some.

I think those are all the significant parallels between the situations, and we now have enough data to draw a conclusion. And what is that conclusion? Why did America ignore both these health crises? It is clear. The ruling class did not stand to lose anything, the problem could be spun in such a way that the president of the time could possibly gain popularity by choosing to ignore the problem, and the potential costs of addressing the problem were considered big enough in both situations. Thus, the President chose to ignore the problem, but who can blame the President, after all, taking those kinds of decisions and sacrificing the downtrodden for the marginal benefit of the highest class, has been the pre-ascribed role of the Presidents throughout the history of the U.S.