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## **The Reagan Administration and the AIDS Epidemic: The Relationship Between Rhetoric and Marginalization**

Leah Pimm

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The Reagan Administration and the AIDS Epidemic: The Relationship Between Rhetoric  
and Marginalization

by

Leah Pimm

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of Honors Requirements

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## ABSTRACT

The use of rhetoric can be a powerful tool to persuade individuals. Politicians are no stranger to using this tool and often employ it when speaking to their constituents. One politician who utilized his own forms of rhetoric is former President Ronald Reagan. Reagan used rhetoric to discuss major issues with the American public, including the AIDS epidemic. This thesis analyzes Reagan and his administration's use of rhetoric regarding the AIDS epidemic in order to answer the research question: How did the Reagan administration's use of rhetoric further marginalize the risk groups associated with the AIDS epidemic? Although previous literature has been published on Reagan's rhetoric, and many anthropological analyses of rhetoric itself, there is not much literature specifically examining Reagan's use of rhetoric during the AIDS epidemic. Through the use of coding, I analyzed the instances where rhetoric was used when the Reagan administration spoke about the AIDS epidemic. I found that the Reagan administration often used rhetoric to avoid discussing the complex issues of the epidemic and taking responsibility for stopping the spread of the disease. This, in turn, led to the continued marginalization of AIDS patients and the risk groups associated with the disease. Research on this topic is important because marginalized groups are often scapegoated during times of crisis. This can be seen in recent times with the rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans in response to the spread of COVID-19. My hope is for this thesis to contribute to the existing literature on rhetoric in political discourse and inspire further studies on this subject in order to help eradicate marginalization in our society.

***Keywords: Reagan, Koop, rhetoric, AIDS, political discourse, marginalization***

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful friends Jess and Kate. Throughout all of college, you two have brought me so much joy and laughter. I do not think I would have been as successful in college if it were not for our friendship.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

AFDC	Assistance for Families with Dependent Children
AIDS	acquired immune deficiency syndrome
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
GLF	Gay Liberation Front
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
IV	intravenous
TANF	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s, acquired immune deficiency syndrome, or AIDS, became a topic of contention and misunderstanding. One of the reasons for this was that it affected people of marginalized groups, such as gay men and intravenous drug users. Scholars Tina Perez and George Dionisopoulos (1995) have pointed out that because the issue primarily affected these marginalized groups, the disease quickly became a political issue. Due to this politicization, the president of the United States at the time, Ronald Reagan, would stay largely silent on AIDS (Perez and Dionisopoulos 1995, 22). The disease was first discovered in 1981, the year Reagan was inaugurated. However, he did not speak to the American public about the disease until 1987 (18). The purpose of this thesis is to study the effects of rhetoric in political discourse by analyzing the Reagan administration's use of rhetorical tropes. By doing so, I reveal how their use of rhetoric led to the further marginalization of the risk groups associated with AIDS.

When I began thinking about the research I wanted to conduct for my thesis, I knew I wanted to pursue a topic within medical anthropology. My advisor recommended that I read the academic work of famed medical anthropologist Paul Farmer and symbolic anthropologist Emily Martin. Farmer is renowned for his work in Haiti with AIDS patients. One of the books I read by Paul Farmer (1999), *Infections and Inequalities*, contained a chapter titled "Invisible Women." This chapter discussed how women are often afflicted with AIDS. Unfortunately, women are overlooked when AIDS is being discussed because the disease has become synonymous with gay men and intravenous drug users (Farmer 1999, 61). Due to this oversight, Farmer explained that there is a need

for more research concerning women with AIDS, especially those who are impoverished (60).

Taking this need for more research into consideration, I decided that I wanted to conduct my research with women who suffer from AIDS. Specifically, I wanted to examine why black women and other women of color are disproportionately afflicted with the disease. I planned on working with a local organization in Hattiesburg that supports women who have AIDS. I wanted to volunteer with the organization and later interview some of the women who were a part of the organization and had human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) or AIDS. However, around the time I decided to pursue this research, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic led to a period of quarantine that did not allow for close contact with individuals due to how the disease is spread. The Institutional Review Board barred researchers from conducting in-person research with individuals, and I never heard back from the organization I wanted to work with regarding the possibility of working remotely. Therefore, I decided I would need to pursue a different topic. One that would not involve in-person contact.

While brainstorming new topic ideas for my thesis, I knew I still wanted to pursue something related to AIDS. Emily Martin's (1994) book, *Flexible Bodies*, became the inspiration for my new thesis topic. In her book, Martin analyzed how Americans have viewed different infectious diseases from polio to AIDS. Martin did this by analyzing how Americans discussed immunity and how it changed over time. After reading *Flexible Bodies*, I decided to pursue something within both the symbolic and medical anthropology subfields that were connected to AIDS. I began researching AIDS and Americans' response to the disease and came across an article that featured a video with

members of Reagan's administration joking about the AIDS epidemic (Lopez 2016). After seeing this video, I decided that I wanted to analyze the rhetoric used by Reagan and members of his administration when discussing AIDS. Specifically, I wanted to study how the Reagan administration's use of rhetoric led to the marginalization of certain social groups.

My research is primarily concerned with analyzing political discourse. According to communication studies scholars Bahram Kazemian and Somayyeh Hashemi (2014), the rhetoric used in a politician's discourse often reveals the "goals, interests, and joint assumptions" that underlie their actions (Kazemian and Hashemi 2014, 1178). Using this logic, I analyzed the political discourse of the Reagan administration to reveal their goals, interests, and assumptions regarding the AIDS epidemic. I originally wanted to research the Reagan administration's explicit bias towards the risk groups associated with AIDS. However, my advisor pointed out to me that I could not know for sure whether or not Reagan and his administration were aware they held such biases. Therefore, I decided to examine how their use of rhetoric led to marginalization instead. This led me to my final research question: How did the Reagan administration's use of rhetoric regarding the AIDS epidemic lead to the marginalization of the risk groups associated with the disease?

By answering this research question, this thesis stands to contribute much to the scholarship concerning anthropology, rhetoric, the Reagan administration, and AIDS. Anthropology could gain a lot from analyzing rhetoric in political discourse. By including the perspective of rhetoric when analyzing cultural phenomena, an anthropologist can see that rhetoric is a tool used by people to "determine themselves and others" and to persuade and convince one another (Carrithers 2005, 581). With rhetoric

being such a large part of the human experience, it would make sense to have more anthropologists studying the topic. This thesis will also be contributing to the existing scholarship on Reagan and his rhetoric. While there is existing scholarship on this topic, for example, Pierce and Weiler's (1992) *Reagan and Public Discourse in America*, there is no scholarship specifically examining the Reagan administration's use of rhetoric concerning AIDS. More research on this specific topic is needed since the effects of the disease were so detrimental. Above all, my hope for this thesis is that it demonstrates to its readers the importance of understanding the rhetoric used by politicians regarding controversial issues. Understanding a politician's rhetoric can help avoid scapegoating marginalized groups and being misinformed on important issues.

## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Historical Background of the AIDS Epidemic in the United States**

As previously mentioned, cases of AIDS in the United States began to be recorded in 1981 (Perez & Dionisopoulos 1995, 18). However, Reagan would not publicly speak about the disease until 1987 (18). Journalist Randy Shilts argued that Reagan's silence in regard to AIDS is due to the fact that he did not agree with the lifestyles of the risk groups associated with the disease (Shilts 1987, xxii). When Reagan and his administration did start to publicly discuss AIDS, their rhetoric revealed their distaste for the lifestyles of these risk groups. When looking at the political discourse surrounding AIDS, it seems as though the Reagan administration only started discussing the disease in order to prevent Americans who conformed to a more socially accepted lifestyle from catching the disease.

One of the most contentious points of the AIDS epidemic was that it primarily affected gay men. Therefore, with the onslaught of the AIDS epidemic, there was a direct conflict between the gay rights movement and the conservative counterrevolution Reagan represented. Historians agree that the gay rights movement began on June 28, 1969, with the start of the Stonewall riots in New York City (Hall 2010, 546). These riots began after the prominent gay bar, Stonewall, was raided by the police (545). Following these riots, a plethora of gay rights organizations, newspapers, bookstores, telephone helplines, and other resources for LGBTQ individuals were created (546). With the advent of safe spaces for LGBTQ individuals to voice their opinion, many began to discuss their distaste for the mainstream American way of life. A 1970 article written by Gay Liberation Front (GLF) leader Kiyoshi Kuromiya perfectly captures the revolutionary spirit many LGBTQ

people felt at this time. Kuromiya wrote, “Homosexuals have burst their chains and abandoned their closets...we come battle-scarred and angry to topple your sexist, racist, hateful society...to challenge the incredible hypocrisy of your sexual monogamy, your oppressive sexual role-playing, (and) your nuclear family” (549). For the first time in American history, LGBTQ individuals were able to publicly reject traditional American values and instead write their own narratives for American life.

While much political upheaval was taking place throughout the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, many older, conservative, white Americans felt that their way of life was being threatened. These individuals desired a return to what they deemed the “good old days.” This meant upholding heteronormative gender roles and other traditional American values (Vogel 2018, 52). The 1980 Republican presidential candidate, Ronald Reagan, represented an opportunity for this return (52). The values promoted by Reagan were in direct contention with the values of the gay rights movement that had been gaining momentum throughout the 1970s. Reagan winning the presidential election in 1980 represented what historians call a “conservative counterculture” (Smith 2017, 4). This term could be described as a movement against the liberal politics of the past two decades to promote more conservative policies. As the AIDS epidemic worsened in the United States, the politics of the gay rights movement and the conservative counterculture led by Reagan were directly pitted against one another.

As a result of these two ideologies being pitted against each other, AIDS became an increasingly politicized issue in the United States. Perez and Dionisopoulos recognize that this politicization led to the Reagan administration not wanting to discuss AIDS for “fear that explicit discussion of homosexuality and IV (intravenous) drug practice would

be interpreted as officially sanctioning such behavior” (Perez and Dionisopoulos 1995, 22). This led to Reagan’s infamous silence on AIDS. Due to the president’s silence, Surgeon General C. Everett Koop took responsibility for informing the American public correctly about the disease. Although Koop was a conservative, he knew he could not let his morals get in the way of reporting the actual facts about AIDS (24). Therefore, in January of 1987, Koop wrote the *Surgeon General’s Report on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome*. Koop knew other members of the Reagan administration would try to “water down” his report by only promoting abstinence, so he “jumped the chain of command for clearance” (24). Koop’s report covered many taboo topics for its time, including encouraging the use of condoms to help prevent the spread of AIDS and educating young children about the disease (26).

After Koop’s report was released to the American public, other members of Reagan’s administration were horrified by his recommendations. Most notably, Secretary of Education William Bennett and Domestic Policy Assistant Gary Bauer were not happy with Koop’s belief that children should receive childhood sex education and be educated on AIDS (Perez and Dionisopoulos 1995, 26). Bennett and Bauer believed that children should only be taught abstinence in schools and that it should be stressed to children that sex was only a part of marriage (26). Additionally, Bauer stated that sex education in schools “should clearly prefer heterosexual sex over homosexual sex” (26). While this conflict within the administration was occurring, Reagan still stayed silent. The disagreements between members of the Reagan administration demonstrate the deep conflicts the disease brought to the surface of politics.



## **The Anthropology of Rhetoric**

The study of language has been a major part of American anthropology since its conception. Over time, the discipline's study of language has changed and expanded to include subjects such as the study of rhetoric. There is much to be gained by anthropologists studying rhetoric. For one, an analysis of rhetoric can lead to a better understanding of a culture. It can also, in the case of the AIDS epidemic, demonstrate how a social or cultural group can be marginalized through language.

In order to discuss the study of rhetoric in anthropology, one must first discuss anthropologists' understanding of culture. According to anthropologist Carola Lentz (2017), the study of culture has always been an important part of the discipline because it is used to understand how "social actors conceive their own identities, build communities, draw group boundaries, and claim rights" (Lentz 2017, 181). However, in recent years, the use of the concept of culture in anthropology has become a subject of criticism amongst scholars in the discipline (182). One major criticism of anthropology's conception of culture is that it relies on the false assumption that all cultural groups have strict boundaries and differences between one another (199). Anthropologists such as Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) argue that the discipline should completely abandon the concept of culture because it is used to explain cultural phenomena based on differences in culture (Abu-Lughod 1991, 143). This, according to Abu-Lughod, leads to non-western groups being alienated and treated as an "other" compared to western societies (146). These criticisms of the concept of culture demonstrate the need for anthropologists to reimagine their understanding of culture.

While there are many criticisms against anthropology's understanding of culture, Lentz does not think the discipline should abandon the concept altogether (Lentz 2017, 198). She argues that anthropologists should move away from studying the differences between various cultural groups and instead study *how* differences are being made between cultural groups (199). Studying how differences manifest themselves in various cultures is useful because these differences do not occur randomly. Rather, they are a product of "real essentialisms" (200). By this, Lentz means differences in culture are a product of real events that have affected a group of people. Therefore, anthropologists need to study the language, discourse, and symbols used by a cultural group that lead to the defining of their culture (200). I have applied this argument to my own research. By studying the use of discourse and symbols by Reagan and his administration, an individual can understand the culture that led to the further marginalization of the risk groups associated with AIDS.

As previously mentioned, there is a need for more anthropologists to consider discourse and symbols when studying a culture. This need is answered by anthropologists studying language. The anthropological study of language began in the United States with Franz Boas's four-field approach to anthropology (Duranti 2003, 324). This approach by Boas ruled that the study of linguistics was just as important to anthropology as, say, archaeology (324). Initially, the anthropological study of language was primarily interested in documenting and describing indigenous languages as a form of "salvage ethnography" (326). This term refers to the Boasian belief that indigenous cultures being destroyed by colonization needed to be documented by anthropologists. By the 1960s, however, a paradigm shift occurred within linguistic anthropology (326). This shift

included viewing language as a “culturally organized and culturally organizing domain” (329). By viewing language in this way, anthropologists could better understand how language was used in conversations and activities (329). In total, this era of linguistic anthropology was interested in how an individual’s culture was reflected in their use of language. In the late 1980s and into the present, another shift occurred in linguistic anthropology (332). Anthropologists began to view language as an interactional force (332). By thinking of language in this way, linguistic anthropologists began to study language in order to understand how people, institutions, and communities change over time (332). Essentially, anthropologists became concerned with how language affects larger social structures.

The shifting views of language within the subfield of linguistic anthropology led to the inclusion of the study of rhetoric in the field. Rhetoric can be defined as “an instrument to gain knowledge about reality and a means to create the customs, lifestyles, mores, ethos, and habitus we call culture” (Mokrzan and Songin-Mokrzan 2015, 257). Anthropologist Michael Carrithers (2005) maintains that studying rhetoric is key to understanding culture because it is a tool unique to humans (Carrithers 2005, 579). The first anthropologists to study rhetoric as a part of language and culture were Franz Boas, James Frazer, and Bronislaw Malinowski (Mokrzan 2014, 10). These anthropologists’ study of rhetoric largely focused on metaphors, allegories, and symbols in the thoughts and languages of tribal societies (10). However, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that anthropologists began to conduct large-scale studies on rhetoric (10). This coincides with the shift in linguistic anthropology in the 1960s that focused on trying to understand

how people utilized language in conversations and in activities that reflected their culture (Duranti 2003, 329).

As these shifts were occurring in the field of linguistic anthropology, cultural anthropologists were working to incorporate the study of rhetoric into their research. This is expressed by symbolic anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973). He pointed out that the social sciences had no analytical framework for interpreting symbolic action and metaphorical speech, “With no notion of how metaphor...and all the other elements of what we lamely call ‘style’ operate--even...sociologists lack the symbolic resources out of which to construct a more incisive formulation” (Geertz 1973, 209). Geertz’s writing conveyed a need for social sciences, such as anthropology, to include the study of rhetoric in their analyses. It demonstrated the need for social scientists to truly understand how rhetoric operated and the effects of its usage. Only when this understanding was achieved could anthropologists begin to understand how language is used between people and in activities to reflect culture.

In recent times, more anthropological studies of rhetoric have been executed. Michał Mokrzan (2014) calls this the new “theoretical and methodological trend in anthropology,” which he has coined with the terms “rhetorical anthropology” or “rhetorical ethnography” (Mokrzan 2014, 14). The book *The Social Use of Metaphor: Essays in the Anthropology of Rhetoric* by David Sapir and Christopher Crocker (1977) demonstrates the expansion of the repertoire of rhetorical concepts and terms within anthropology (11). The book states that the aim of anthropologists studying rhetoric is to analyze how “tropes used by social actors operate in specific social contexts” (12-13). By reflecting upon tropes in this way, anthropologists are largely analyzing the “persuasive

function of rhetorical tropes” (13). I analyzed rhetoric and rhetorical tropes in a similar manner to *The Social Use of Metaphor* for this thesis. I studied the rhetorical tropes of the Reagan administration in order to understand how they operated within larger forms of rhetoric to persuade individuals to marginalize certain groups within the social context of AIDS.

An example of how rhetoric can be used to persuade humans to think differently can be seen with materials and discourse relating to disease and the immune system. In her book, *Flexible Bodies*, anthropologist Emily Martin sought to understand how the American public’s view of the immune system changed from “the days of polio to the age of AIDS” (Martin 1994, title page). In order to study this topic, Martin and her colleagues interviewed a variety of people from different neighborhoods in order to understand how they viewed “health, illness, and the makeup of their bodies” (Martin 1994, 14). In addition to these interviews, Martin and her colleagues also conducted participant observation at clinics, support groups, college classes, training courses for workers and managers in corporations, and alternative health clinics (11). She stated in this book that she was looking for “the delicate outlines of an emerging new common sense, entailing changes in notions of identity, groups, wholes or parts, changes that will have profound implications for how we see... community class, gender or age.” (13). Essentially, in this book Martin analyzes the rhetoric surrounding health and the immune system in order to get a better understanding of how individuals view their own health, body, and immunity. She further suggests that this analysis will reveal greater cultural ideas surrounding community, class, gender, and age.

One of the rhetorical tropes Martin discussed in her book was the use of metaphor when discussing the human body. For instance, in the 1980s, many mainstream American media outlets portrayed the human body as a “defended nation-state, organized around a hierarchy of gender, race, and class” (Martin 1994, 53). This hierarchy of gender, race, and class could be seen in how the immune system cells were presented in this “war scene” (55). One category of immune system cells, macrophages, were presented as surrounding and digesting foreign organisms (55). Meanwhile, the other category of immune system cells, T cells, were presented as killing organisms by transferring toxins onto them (55). The macrophages were a “lower form of cell.” While the T cell was shown as being “more advanced, evolutionary, and having higher functions” (55). Martin argued that the differing presentations of these two categories of immune system cells represented a hierarchical division of labor “overlaid with gender categories” (55). She specifically noted how the macrophages were in charge of surrounding and engulfing, while the T cells were in charge of injecting and penetrating (55). These different categories of responsibility and their hierarchy serve as a metaphor for American society’s habit of categorizing labor according to gender.

The study of language as a part of anthropology has a long, storied history. In the beginning, language was incorporated into anthropological studies in an attempt to conserve the memory of a cultural group as a part of salvage ethnography. As time has gone on, many anthropologists have realized that studying language can be useful in understanding a cultural or social phenomenon on a large scale. This has led to an increase in the number of studies done on rhetoric. Martin’s study on the changing views of immunity in the United States through the use of the rhetorical trope metaphor is an

excellent example of this. In addition to studying rhetoric in terms of health and immunity, anthropologists have also applied their study of rhetoric to political discourse.

### *The Study of Political Rhetoric in Anthropology*

There are many other examples of how rhetoric is used to influence American culture. One of the most notable examples of this is politician's use of rhetoric to persuade and influence their constituents. According to anthropologist Donald V Kurtz (2001), politicians "engage in strategies to acquire power to increase their authority, enhance their legitimacy, defeat a competitor, retain the right to govern, and bend others to their will" (Kurtz 2001, 10). One of the most prominent strategies utilized by these politicians is rhetoric. For example, many politicians use the rhetorical trope of parallelism in their speeches. This rhetorical trope is the use of reoccurring "syntactical and lexical similarities" in a sentence, clause, or phrase (Kazemian & Hashemi 2014, 1182). By using parallelism, a politician can "call the audience to attention and underscore the topic...clarify and beautify the sentence" (1183). Examples of parallelism can be seen in many of President Obama's speeches. For instance, in one speech he said, "No bailouts, no handouts, and no copouts" (1183). These forms of rhetoric can aid politicians in effectively communicating with their audience. They can also symbolically reveal the underlying implicit biases of politicians towards certain topics.

Anthropologists have realized the importance of studying rhetoric. One reason for this is that politician's use of rhetoric can lead to the marginalization of certain communities (Foster 2017, 54). For instance, while Reagan was running for president in 1980, he coined the term "welfare queen" (50). This term was used to refer to "poor women of color who were assumed to give birth to children for financial gain, at the

expense of the taxpayer” (50). By using this term, Reagan furthered harmful racist and gendered stereotypes about poor women of color that would lead to their marginalization (50). This can be seen with the subsequent welfare reform movement that replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). This put a limit on how long a person could receive welfare (54-55). The use of rhetoric by politicians that leads to marginalization is harmful to many minority communities. Therefore, it is important for anthropologists to study, recognize, and bring attention to the effects of this form of rhetoric.

Another reason why it is important for anthropologists to study political rhetoric is that our society is becoming increasingly globalized and technologically advanced. With recent advancements in technology, more politicians are able to reach a larger audience and “ritualize and propagandize political events” through their use of rhetoric (McLeod 1999, 370). One example of this is former President Donald Trump’s use of Twitter to speak to the American public. When speaking to his 88 million Twitter followers, Trump often used the rhetorical tropes hyperbole and exaggeration (Hodges 2019, 6). In Trump’s words, “I play to people’s fantasies... People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole... It’s a very effective form of promotion” (5). Anthropologist Adam Hodges (2019) recognizes that this use of rhetoric by Trump in his tweets is meant to act as “agents of mass distraction that merely deflect our attention and divide our efforts to prevent the implementation of his worst policies” (7). President Trump’s tweets demonstrate how dangerous political rhetoric can be. With the increasing amount of rhetoric used by politicians reaching a larger audience due to social media, it is important



that Americans are able to comprehend and analyze political rhetoric in a critical manner (McLeod 1999, 370). By having more anthropologists studying political rhetoric, more Americans will be able to do so.

The discourse and rhetoric used by politicians are powerful tools to gain support from their followers. Although in some instances, these tools can be used for good, the previous examples discussed have shown that they can have dangerous consequences. Political rhetoric can lead to marginalization and the distraction of citizens from real problems in their society. Reagan was no stranger to using political rhetoric as a tool when he addressed the public in order to gain support. However, his use of political rhetoric had many negative effects. Scholars have pointed out that Reagan had a number of rhetorical styles that he used when addressing the public. These specific forms of rhetoric can be seen when he addressed the issue of AIDS in the United States.

### ***The Political Rhetoric of Reagan***

The rhetoric used by Reagan during his presidency had detrimental effects on American society. His rhetoric often led to scapegoating and marginalization, and it did so by avoiding the complex social issues involved with many of the problems the United States faced at the time. Although not much scholarship has been published from anthropologists regarding the rhetoric of Reagan, the discipline stands to gain a lot from studying his rhetoric. This is especially true in connection with the AIDS epidemic.

Studying the past political rhetoric of Reagan in regard to the AIDS epidemic is useful because it can help prevent harmful rhetoric from being used by politicians in the future. Reagan himself utilized a number of different forms of rhetoric when speaking to the American public. One example was his use of ceremonialization. Communication

studies scholars Barnett Pearce and Michael Weiler recognize that Reagan used ceremonialization in order to create a “feel good” rhetoric that turned politics into a Hollywood production of sorts (Pearce and Weiler 1992, 13). Essentially, Reagan only discussed the accomplishments of America and ignored the more complicated social issues the country was facing. This, according to Pearce and Weiler, created an apathetic group of voters ill-informed on current issues and resulted in a diminished ability for America to deal with complex social issues (13). The effects of this form of rhetoric can be seen in Reagan’s failed “War Against Drugs,” his defunding of welfare programs, and his response to the AIDS epidemic.

Another form of rhetoric that was often used by Reagan is individualization. This form of rhetoric emphasized the culture of individual responsibility in the United States (Waterston 1997, 1383). Individualization was utilized heavily by the federal government in regard to the AIDS epidemic. This was done by promoting “moral” behavior and the teaching of sex education in homes instead of in schools. According to anthropologist Alisse Waterston (1997), the biomedical system present in the United States suggested that only individuals, not the government itself, could stop the spread of AIDS (1384). This form of thinking is quite prevalent in the speeches and documents concerning AIDS released by the Reagan administration. Waterston recognizes that this form of rhetoric is harmful because it “ultimately helps protect, maintain, and reproduce existing inequalities” (1384). It does so by not getting at the root of the problem or the complex social issues that played a part in the emergence of the AIDS epidemic in the first place. With Reagan’s use of ceremonialization and individualization, it is no wonder that the risk groups associated with AIDS were marginalized by the greater American public.

## **Conclusion**

The conservative counterrevolution that began in the 1980s with the election of Ronald Reagan served as a direct dissent to the gay rights movement that had been gaining strength since 1969. The new era Reagan brought to the United States valued certain moral characteristics held most commonly by white, middle class, conservative Americans. Because AIDS is a disease that primarily affected gay men and intravenous drug users, it is no surprise that the disease was quickly politicized and treated as an issue of morality. This politicization of the disease led to a mostly silent President Reagan, who was afraid that speaking about AIDS would lead to people thinking homosexuality, having multiple sexual partners, and intravenous drug use was morally acceptable. The silence of Reagan left the other members of his administration, most notably Koop, Bauer, and Bennett, to argue the best course of action for ending AIDS. The actions, or lack thereof, taken by the Reagan administration during the AIDS epidemic ultimately led to the marginalization of the risk groups associated with the disease. This leads me to my ultimate research question: How did the Reagan administration marginalize certain groups of Americans through their use of rhetoric when discussing AIDS?

## CHAPTER III: METHODS

In order to answer my research question, I have conducted an analysis of the rhetorical tropes used by the Reagan administration in 14 different federal documents between the years 1985 and 1988. A rhetorical trope is defined as a rhetorical mechanism meant to organize various forms of discourse in a persuasive manner (Mokrzan 2014, 2). For the purpose of this thesis, the following linguistic forms are all being referred to as rhetorical tropes: parallelism, metaphor, direct quotation, emotive language, oxymoron, passive voice, personification, and antithesis. I have done this in order to avoid confusion. These rhetorical tropes were utilized by the Reagan administration to further their larger forms of rhetoric, ceremonialization and individualization. By analyzing rhetorical tropes in relation to ceremonialization and individualization, I have gained an understanding of how language was used to marginalize groups during the AIDS epidemic.

The first step in my research process was to gather the necessary documents. I found the majority of these documents in the online archive of the Reagan Library. Additionally, the online archives of the United States National Library of Medicine provided me with Surgeon General Koop's *Report on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome*, his *Understandings AIDS* pamphlet, and a video of Reagan answering questions from reporters about AIDS. In addition to these databases, I also checked the online database for the Library of Congress, Govinfo (an online database of U.S. government documents), the Federal Registrar, and the National Archives. However, these databases did not have any federal documents from the executive branch discussing AIDS. Most of the documents and artifacts from these websites either came from the

Reagan Library or discussed the protests towards Reagan's approach to the AIDS epidemic. Unfortunately, because of the pandemic, my sources for finding primary documents were limited. I attempted to gain more primary resources by emailing the Reagan Library several times and asking for scans of certain documents. Due to the emergence of COVID-19, the librarians there were only doing telework. This meant they could not send me any scans. Regardless, I was still able to find a substantial number of primary documents from the online databases of the Reagan Library and the National Library of Medicine.

When I initially started trying to find primary documents for my research, I received some ideas from a book titled *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis* by Jennifer Brier (2009). In the third chapter of her book, Brier discusses the actions of the Reagan administration in response to the AIDS epidemic. Throughout the chapter she discusses various initiatives the administration took regarding AIDS. For instance, she discusses Executive Order 12291 (Brier 2009, 79). This order sought to add AIDS to the list of dangerous contagious diseases (79). Additionally, she discusses William Bennett and Gary Bauer's role in the federal government's response to AIDS, as well as *Surgeon General Koop's Report on AIDS* and his *Understanding AIDS* pamphlet (87). Brier's book gave me a starting point in my search for primary documents. Using the information I learned in her book, I searched the Reagan Library online archive for any of the documents she mentioned. After looking for specific primary documents in the archive, I began doing general searches of AIDS and President Reagan. I also found some primary documents by searching AIDS and the Reagan administration in Google Scholar. It is through this search engine that I found Koop's *Report on AIDS* and *Understanding*

*AIDS* pamphlet. The search for these primary documents was done entirely online due to the pandemic.

I ended up coding the following documents: the *Understanding AIDS* pamphlet, “Proclamation 5709” *Surgeon General Koop’s Report on AIDS*, the “AIDS Commission”, “Remarks at the American Foundation for AIDS Research Awards Dinner”, “Presidential Briefing Memo”, the “President’s 10 Point Action Plan”, “Executive Order 12601”, “Proclamation 5892”, “Interview with White House Newspaper Correspondents”, “Informal Exchange with Reporters”, “Remarks at a Panel Discussion for AIDS Research and Treatment”, “Statement Announcing HIV Action Plan”, and “Taking Questions.” Although not all of these documents contained rhetoric from the Reagan administration that led to marginalization, the majority of them did.

All of the primary documents I analyzed were documents from the executive branch of the United States government during the Reagan era. The reason I chose to only analyze the executive branch’s response to the AIDS epidemic is that it is more representative of the United States as a whole. By this, I mean the president who is elected to office by the American people displays a set of ideological, moral, and political qualities that connects with the majority of the American public (Renan 2020, 1133). The authority that is given to him by the American public is “justified by his personal connection to the people through the election... he is their chosen leader” (1133). Being the elected chief of the United States gives the president an immense amount of symbolic power over the country (1149). This immense amount of symbolic power leaves them responsible for leading the country through large-scale crises, such as the AIDS

epidemic. Therefore, studying the rhetoric of the executive branch in relation to AIDS made the most sense.

In order to analyze the primary documents, I decided to utilize content analysis coding. Content analysis coding is a type of research that allows forms of communication to be translated into “systematic, objective, and quantitative description(s)” (Rourke and Anderson 2004, 5). Essentially, the communication content is separated into units, assigned a category, and tallies are found for each category (5). For my content analysis, I found all the instances of rhetorical tropes being used in the primary documents. All of the rhetorical tropes were then organized into two broad categories of rhetoric: ceremonialization and individualization. After finding all the instances of rhetoric being used in the primary documents, I went through them again and counted the number of times a certain type of rhetoric was used. This use of content analysis coding allows for a quantitative approach to an otherwise qualitative type of research.

After finishing the content analysis coding, I analyzed the results. While doing this, I looked for any patterns or relationships between certain types of rhetoric and the speaker, author, or type of document. Then, drawing on my knowledge of political rhetoric gained from my secondary sources, I began to think about the role each type of rhetoric played in the document. I asked myself questions such as: “Why would the speaker or author employ this type of rhetoric here?”, “What does the speaker or author have to gain from the use of this rhetoric?” and most importantly, “How could the use of this rhetoric lead to the further marginalization of certain groups?” This all led to the discussion of my findings in the next chapter.

There are limitations to the research I have done. The most glaring limitation is the decreased access I had to libraries and archives due to many being closed because of the pandemic. The number of primary sources I have analyzed is not as robust as I would have liked. However, there are enough sources to provide a general look into the executive branch's response to the AIDS epidemic. In similar fashion, another limitation of this study was the lack of primary documents from the Reagan administration regarding AIDS that exist. As Perez and Dionisopoulos have discussed, the Reagan administration did not publicly acknowledge AIDS until 1987 and stayed largely silent on the issue (Perez & Dionisopoulos 2014, 18). Therefore, there was not a robust set of primary documents to analyze. Regardless, I was able to gather a good amount of data for this analysis.



## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The content analysis done on the primary documents revealed certain trends and continuities with the rhetoric used by the Reagan administration in their political discourse. Of the 14 documents that were coded, nine contained rhetoric that caused marginalization. The results proved to be surprising in some instances, yet in other instances, the results were to be expected. The rhetorical tropes that were found include parallelism, oxymoron, direct quotations, passive voice, personification, antithesis, and metaphor. All of these different rhetorical tropes were used by Reagan and his administration to further their rhetoric of ceremonialization and individualization. This analysis of rhetorical tropes and rhetoric will lead to a better understanding of how the Reagan administration was able to further marginalize the risk groups associated with the disease.

### **Ceremonialization**

One of the most prominent uses of rhetoric by Reagan and his administration was ceremonialization. As has previously been discussed, Michael Weiler and W. Barnett Pearce define ceremonialization as a tactic used in political discourse to win over the affections of an audience by focusing on positive subjects and ignoring more negative and complex issues (Weiler and Pearce 1992, 11). By avoiding the discussion of negative and complex issues, such as AIDS or drug use, Reagan created a heartwarming picture of America for Americans. Evidence of Reagan's use of ceremonialization can be found frequently in his speeches on AIDS.

One component of Reagan's ceremonialization was to only focus on the positive elements of the issues America was facing. This can be seen when he discusses the AIDS epidemic; he effectively ignores the negative outcomes of the disease, such as the discrimination and the deaths of thousands of Americans. For instance, in his speech at the American Foundation for AIDS research awards dinner, Reagan chose to only focus on the positive outcomes of AIDS research and treatment. In the speech Reagan stated, "You know, it's been said that when the night is darkest, we see the stars. And there have been some shining moments throughout this horrible AIDS epidemic" (Reagan 1987d). This use of ceremonialization by Reagan romanticized the AIDS epidemic and ignored the negative outcomes of it, such as the thousands of deaths and discrimination against the risk groups most affected by the disease. By not acknowledging this, Reagan allowed the American public to continue to act out in ignorance.

Often, the solutions Reagan offered for ending the spread of AIDS were overly simple and did not address the complex social issues involved with the disease. By not addressing these issues, Reagan allowed for the scapegoating of AIDS risk groups and the continued spread of the disease. Reagan's unwillingness to discuss the complex social issues associated with AIDS can be seen in his correspondence with reporters. In one informal interview with reporters in April of 1987, Reagan dramatically simplified the AIDS epidemic. The reporter asked Reagan, "Sir, what's the best preventative measure for AIDS that you refer to in your speech?" Reagan avoided the question at first, stating that the reason the federal government was expanding funding for AIDS was to find out.

Then the reporter asked, “Should you just say no?” To which Reagan replied, “That’s a pretty good answer. Yes” (Reagan 1987a). This exchange exemplifies Reagan’s rhetoric of ceremonialization. Once again, Reagan has dramatically simplified the AIDS epidemic. His answer to the reporter and his general recommendations for stopping the spread of AIDS did not take into account the roles poverty, sexuality, and addiction played in the spread of the virus. Simply telling people to say no did not get at the root cause of the issue; therefore, people were not accurately informed on how to stop the spread of AIDS and instead used scapegoating as a means to stop the spread.

Reagan often used the rhetorical trope emotive language to call the American public to action; however, his use of this rhetorical trope allowed him to once again ignore the complex issues associated with AIDS. This, in turn, led to an ignorant and ill-informed constituency that allowed for marginalization to continue. Many examples of this rhetorical trope can be found towards the end of Reagan’s speeches and other government documents concerning AIDS, where he called upon the American people to act with compassion for those who were suffering from the disease. One example of this can be found in Proclamation 5709, which announced the celebration of AIDS awareness and prevention month. At the end of this proclamation, Reagan wrote, “the battle against AIDS calls for calmness, compassion, and conviction” (Reagan 1987c). Although at first glance this call for compassion seems genuine, further investigation of this document reveals that this compassion was reserved only for those who followed the conservative lifestyle promoted by Reagan.

Those who did not follow the conservative lifestyle promoted by Reagan were blamed by him for the nation's suffering, which led to their further marginalization. In the same document previously discussed, Reagan effectively blames those who do not follow a more conservative lifestyle, essentially the groups most affected by AIDS, for the nation's suffering. He wrote in the proclamation, "Our Nation is the poorer for the lost contribution of those who, in rejecting it, have suffered great pain, sorrow, and even death" (Reagan 1987c). Here, Reagan is saying that individuals who have not followed his advice for stopping the spread of AIDS are responsible for their own suffering. It seems as though Reagan was blaming the spread of AIDS on those who had caught the disease since they did not follow the advice given by the federal government. In essence, he was saying AIDS risk groups have marginalized themselves due to their careless lifestyles. With this quote, Reagan was subtly claiming that since they followed a lifestyle that did not conform to conservative ideals, AIDS risk groups were not truly a part of the nation and therefore deserved to suffer.

Reagan also appealed to the emotions of his audience by discussing sexual morality. By doing this, Reagan continued the blame and subsequent marginalization of the risk groups. As previously mentioned, one aspect of Reagan that caused him to gain popularity with Americans was his appeal to traditional values and his desire to return to the "good old days" of America. In an interview with White House newspaper correspondents, Reagan discussed his distaste with sex education being taught in schools. Reagan stated, "I have been very disturbed that under this same theory of no values being

taught, value-free education, that how do you start talking about sex to children and to young people without the moral side of that question being brought up?” (Reagan 1987b). According to Reagan, children should only be taught about sex as an issue of morality. Although on the surface, this method of education would seem to curb the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS, it does not work because the United States has a diverse population with varying value systems. By not having these different values accommodated, people were not properly educated on how to stop the spread of AIDS. And with this continued spread came the deaths of thousands of Americans, and the continued rhetoric of blame.

Discussions of religious morality were also brought into the AIDS epidemic by Reagan. This once again blamed the risk groups associated with the disease for its continued spread and led to their further marginalization. In the previously discussed interview with White House newspaper correspondents, Reagan also appealed to the emotions of his audience by speaking about morality. This time, though, he brought in his religious views. He stated, “I said that along with that should go the moral teaching of what has always been a part of morality, and that is abstinence. There is one of the Ten Commandments that deals with that particular problem” (Reagan 1987b). This call for religious considerations and the teaching of morality for curbing the spread of AIDS appealed to Reagan’s target audience: white, conservative, middle-class Americans. This talk of religion, however, was not useful for people who did not follow the same religious views as Reagan’s supporters. Therefore, Reagan’s advice was not helpful in curbing the

spread of AIDS. Instead, Reagan inadvertently blamed the spread of AIDS on individuals who did not follow his own religious beliefs.

Reagan's belief that the morals of the past could be used to end the AIDS epidemic is an example of an oxymoron. Weiler and Pearce point out Reagan's flawed logic. They write, "Reagan's contention, his solution to the problem of complexity in the modern world, was that we must adhere to the tradition and fundamental ideas of the past; in other words, complexity is managed most efficiently through simplicity" (Weiler and Pearce 1992, 128). Essentially, Reagan believed that approaching complex issues with simplicity was the best course of action for resolving said issues. Reagan's simplistic approach to the AIDS epidemic was apparent in his speeches and other documents. It was especially apparent in those where he discussed his belief that morality and religious adherence were the best ways to fight the AIDS virus. An example of his use of oxymoron can be seen in the aforementioned quote where Reagan mentions the Ten Commandments and morality as a way to end the spread of AIDS. Unfortunately, Reagan's use of oxymoron greatly reduced the complexity of the AIDS virus to the American people. Also, by promoting this idea of returning to the good old days, Reagan fought against the rights that were gained during the gay rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

Another way Reagan furthered the marginalization of AIDS risk groups was by using direct quotations to elicit an emotive response from his audience. The use of direct quotations for this purpose was prevalent in his speeches on the AIDS epidemic. It also

worked to increase his notoriety as a speaker. For example, in his speech at the American Foundation for AIDS Research awards dinner, Reagan closed out his speech by quoting a young man he met in the hospital dying from AIDS. The man stated, “While I do Accept (sic) death, I think the fight for life is important, and I’m going to fight the disease with every breath I have” (Reagan 1987d). After sharing this quote, Reagan said, “Ladies and Gentlemen, so must we.” (Reagan 1987d). The use of this quote by Reagan elicited an emotional response from his audience that inspired them to continue fighting against AIDS. However, the use of quotes such as this one detracted attention away from how this man got sick in the first place. This man became sick, in part, due to inaction from the federal government. This inaction was primarily caused by AIDS’s connection to homosexuality and intravenous drug use.

Reagan and his administration often employed the use of the rhetorical trope personification, and this led to the marginalization of certain groups connected with AIDS. This trope again allowed the administration to only focus on the positive elements of American society. By using this rhetorical trope, the Reagan administration created good feelings in his audience that allowed them to ignore the complex issues associated with AIDS. Often, American politicians use personification to speak about America as a whole to bring about feelings of patriotism to their audience, and Reagan was no stranger to this. In Proclamation 5892, Reagan discussed the strengths of America. He stated, “One of America’s greatest strengths has always been our ability to work together in times of adversity” (Reagan 1988). By referring to the entirety of America and its ability

to work together, Reagan brought about feelings of patriotism in his audience. By playing on these feelings of patriotism, Reagan was able to focus more on the strengths of Americans. This, in turn, made Americans feel good about themselves and enabled them to not address the complex social issues associated with the AIDS epidemic. However, in all actuality, the social issues associated with AIDS suggested that Americans were not good at working together in times of adversity.

Ceremonialization was a popular form of rhetoric used by the Reagan administration. Its use allowed the administration to ignore the negative and complex social issues that plagued the United States during that time period, and instead focus on the positives of American society. This can be seen with Reagan's handling of many issues, such as the war on drugs, the "welfare queen," and, of course, the AIDS epidemic. The utilization of this form of rhetoric led to an ignorant, ill-informed population of Americans who were unable to come to grips with the complex social issues of the time. This, in turn, led to the marginalization of many social groups who did not follow a traditional conservative lifestyle, including the risk groups associated with the AIDS virus. Although ceremonialization was heavily utilized by the Reagan administration in regard to AIDS, it was not the only form of rhetoric used to discuss the disease.

### **Individualization**

In addition to ceremonialization, anthropologist Alisse Waterston has noted the rhetoric of individual responsibility present in many of the Reagan administration's speeches and documents on AIDS prevention. In four of the twelve documents coded for,



examples of individualistic rhetoric were found. By individualistic rhetoric, I mean language that puts the responsibility for ending the AIDS epidemic upon individual Americans. There were generally three different areas where individualistic rhetoric was used: the promotion of not being sexually promiscuous, not abusing drugs, and the responsibility of parents and educators to teach children about AIDS.

The individualistic rhetoric in Surgeon General Koop's *Understanding AIDS* pamphlet marginalized the risk groups associated with the AIDS epidemic because it did not take into account their lifestyles or experiences. For instance, Koop wrote, "The most effective way to prevent AIDS is avoiding exposure to the virus, which you can control by your own behavior" (Koop 1988, 5). Although Koop was not wrong, it is interesting that there was not a greater focus in his pamphlet on the important role the United States government could have played in helping to prevent AIDS. As Waterston points out, this heavy use of individualistic rhetoric takes attention away from the social and material factors that led to the spread of AIDS in the first place (Waterston 1997, 1381). By not addressing these factors, the Reagan administration avoided the experiences of gay men and intravenous drug users. Not discussing these groups led to false information being circulated about them and the disease itself. One example of this is the false belief that AIDS could be passed through everyday physical contact in schools, the workplace, and swimming pools (Koop 1988, 3). Because misinformation such as this continued, Americans continued to live in ignorance.

In addition to using direct quotations to elicit an emotive response from his audience to further his rhetoric of ceremonialization, Reagan also used this rhetorical trope to further his rhetoric of individualization. At a panel discussion on AIDS research and treatment, Reagan closed out his speech with an inspiring quote by W.H. Auden. The quote was, “The true men of action in our times are not politicians or statesmen but scientists” (Reagan 1987e). The use of this quote brought about an emotive response from the scientists and researchers in the audience, as well as Americans who distrusted government interference. In essence, Reagan was saying that it was the scientists who would actually end the AIDS epidemic, and the American government would play an insignificant role in ending it. Reagan effectively shifted the blame for ending the AIDS epidemic off of the federal government and onto scientists and health care professionals. A reason Reagan would want to do this was because of his unwillingness to address homosexuality, having multiple sexual partners, and the complex social issues involved with intravenous drug use. Although it is true that scientists were key to ending the epidemic, a government has a responsibility to protect its citizens. Americans could have been protected if the government took a more active role in combatting the AIDS epidemic.

The use of the rhetorical trope passive voice by the Reagan administration helped the federal government avoid taking a stance on the issues surrounding the disease. This led to the marginalization of certain Americans. Passive voice was found five times in the documents coded for. Three of these instances occurred during exchanges between

Reagan and reporters. In 1985, Reagan answered questions about the AIDS virus for the first time. At one point during the interview, a journalist asked Reagan: If he had young children of his own, would he send them to school with a child who has AIDS? Reagan's answer to this question avoided taking sides. He said, "I have compassion...for the child that has this [AIDS]... and can't have it explained to him why... he is now an outcast" (Reagan 1985). "On the other hand... It is true that some medical sources had said that this cannot be communicated in any way other than the ones we already know and which would not involve a child being in school. And yet medicine has not come forth and said 'This we know for a fact, that it is safe'" (Reagan 1985). Reagan's use of passive voice here is telling in that he acknowledges that medical experts have said AIDS cannot be transmitted in a school environment. However, he still expressed doubt about this and left it up to American society to decide whether or not they thought it was safe to have children with AIDS in school. This allowed the Reagan administration to not have to take responsibility for educating the public. By doing this, they allowed Americans to continue to live in fear of a virus that was not transmitted in normal day-to-day contact.

The way in which the Reagan administration's use of passive voice led to marginalization can also be seen in a 1987 interview with a White House newspaper correspondent. In this interview, Reagan discussed the connection between sex education in schools and AIDS. Reagan said, "Well, I'm sure that when you – AIDS is probably going to tie in somewhat with the prevalence of sex education in the schools today" (Reagan 1987b). Here, you can see the moment Reagan avoided taking responsibility for

his statement when he switched from first to third person. By pausing and taking himself out of the AIDS narrative, Reagan was using passive voice. Due to his use of passive voice here, Reagan was able to effectively shift the blame for his statements off of himself. This avoidance once again exemplifies the Reagan administration's ability to shift responsibility for the spread of AIDS off of themselves, so they would not have to discuss the divisive social topics that came with the disease. Instead, the responsibility for stopping the spread of AIDS was put upon individual Americans.

The combined use of the ceremonialization and individualization led to the marginalization of the risk groups associated with AIDS. An individualistic rhetoric allowed the Reagan administration to remove the responsibility for ending the spread of AIDS off of themselves, and instead move that responsibility to the American people. This form of rhetoric also allowed the administration to avoid taking a definitive stance on the issues surrounding the AIDS epidemic, such as allowing AIDS positive children in schools. This in turn allowed the continued marginalization of AIDS patients, especially those who did not prescribe to the conservative lifestyle endorsed by Reagan. Although I have only pointed out the negative uses of ceremonialization and individualization, there are instances where the administration used these forms of rhetoric to stop the marginalization of the risk groups associated with the epidemic.

### **Surgeon General Koop's Use of Rhetoric**

As has been previously discussed, Surgeon General Koop was the only member of the Reagan administration who sought to properly educate Americans about the AIDS

virus no matter his own political views. Throughout his *Understanding AIDS* pamphlet, Koop used many of the rhetorical tropes Reagan used in his speeches, interviews, and documents. The difference between these two government leaders' uses of rhetorical tropes is that Koop used these tropes to educate Americans correctly about the AIDS virus. If more members of the Reagan administration used rhetorical tropes in this manner, there would have been less marginalization surrounding AIDS.

Koop used the rhetorical trope parallelism to diminish many of the misconceptions Americans had about the virus. This, in turn, led to a decrease in the fear and blaming of the risk groups associated with AIDS. In his *Understanding AIDS* pamphlet, Koop uses this trope to emphasize the ways a person could and could not contract the virus. He wrote, "You won't get the AIDS virus through everyday contact... You won't get AIDS through a mosquito bite... You won't get AIDS from saliva... You won't get AIDS from a kiss... You won't get AIDS from clothes, a telephone, or a toilet seat" (Koop 1988, 3). Here, Koop is emphasizing facts about the spread of AIDS since many Americans were misinformed on how the virus was actually spread. In this instance, the use of parallelism helped to tear down the many misconceptions Americans had about the disease. Scholars Perez and Dionisopoulos would argue that those misconceptions were caused by the Reagan administration's silence to the American public about AIDS. By removing these misconceptions from the minds of many Americans, Koop helped to stop the fear of AIDS patients.

Emotive language, a rhetorical trope that aided in the marginalization of AIDS risk groups when used by Reagan, was used by Koop to reduce said marginalization. In similar fashion to Reagan, Koop used emotive language and referenced the “good old days” when discussing strategies for preventing the spread of AIDS. However, Koop’s use of emotive language was different from Reagan’s in that he used it to promote the use of condoms. Which was a preventative measure the rest of the Reagan administration avoided discussing.

In his *Understanding AIDS* pamphlet, Koop devoted a section to condoms and how they could be used effectively to decrease the spread of AIDS. He used emotive language and talked about the “good old days” when discussing condoms to persuade older, more conservative Americans that they could be effective against the spread of AIDS. He wrote, “Not so very long ago, condoms were things we didn’t talk about very much. Now, they’re discussed on the evening news and on the front page of your newspaper, and displayed out in the open in your local drugstore, grocery, and convenience store” (Koop 1988, 4). He then goes on to explain that although America’s view of condoms was different during that time than it had been in the past, it was still an effective way to stop the spread of AIDS when used correctly. Here, Koop’s use of emotive language allows him to make a connection to his audience by relating to them. By using this language, Koop effectively promoted a strategy besides morality to stop AIDS. This was helpful for ending the marginalization of AIDS risk groups because it

promoted a way to stop the spread of AIDS that was helpful for all people in the United States, not just conservative Americans.

In Koop's pamphlet, he makes it clear that he knew people would continue to have sex during the AIDS epidemic and offered solutions for those having sex to stop the spread of AIDS. By doing this, Koop effectively removed the need to marginalize AIDS risk groups. One rhetorical trope Koop used to do this was the antithesis. The only instance of antithesis being used in the primary documents was in Koop's *Understanding AIDS* pamphlet, it was specifically in the section that dealt with dating during the AIDS epidemic. Here, Koop expressed the importance of knowing the sexual and drug history of a partner. He wrote, "If you know someone well enough to have sex, then you should be able to talk about AIDS. If someone is unwilling to talk, you shouldn't have sex" (Koop 1988, 4). It is evident that Koop thought it was important for Americans to discuss their sexual history with their partners before having sex. This mode of thinking is different from Reagan's in that it acknowledges that some individuals are not monogamous or have had other sexual partners in the past. This comes in stark contrast to Reagan's view on the issue of sex and AIDS. In terms of sex, the only solution he ever offered for stopping the spread of AIDS was to practice abstinence until marriage. Koop's use of antithesis is valuable in that it acknowledges the lifestyles of many more Americans.

Koop's use of emotive language, parallelism, and antithesis demonstrate how rhetorical tropes could be used positively in political discourse to properly educate

Americans about AIDS. The use of these rhetorical tropes by Koop acknowledged that many Americans led lifestyles that were not conducive to the conservative ideologies of the Reagan administration. Instead of scapegoating these people, leading to their further marginalization, Koop used rhetorical tropes to offer advice and properly educate Americans on how to stop the spread of AIDS. If Reagan himself had used rhetorical tropes in this way, the marginalization of risk groups could have been avoided.

### **The Lack of Metaphors**

A result of the coding that surprised me was the lack of metaphors found. As previously discussed, anthropologists often analyze the use of metaphor when studying rhetoric or linguistics in general. This could be seen with Emily Martin's analysis of America's changing view of the immune system. With so many anthropologists discussing metaphor when doing an analysis of rhetoric, I expected to find many instances of metaphor throughout the documents, speeches, and interviews of the Reagan administration. When I only coded for three instances of metaphors, I became curious as to why that was.

The three instances of metaphors coded for were primarily used to simplify a topic or put it into perspective. The first use of metaphor was when Reagan compared sex education without morals to eating a ham sandwich in an interview with White House correspondents (Reagan 1987b). His reasoning behind this comparison was that sex being taught without morals resulted in children viewing it as only a physical act with no other meaning, similar to eating a ham sandwich. Another use of metaphor is seen in Koop's



*Understanding AIDS* pamphlet, where he wrote that AIDS is a health problem that is “public enemy number one” (Koop 1988, 1). The last example of a metaphor is in a presidential briefing memo. In the memo, Reagan wrote, “we must not make them into modern day lepers,” in reference to those afflicted with AIDS (Roberts and Owens 1985). Metaphors are often used to portray a difficult topic in a simpler way or to put topics into perspective for the listener. In the first metaphor, Reagan tried to put the state of sex education into perspective for Americans. He was trying to prove that sex should not be taught as just a physical act. Similarly, the second metaphor demonstrated to the audience in layman's terms that AIDS will be fought against in the United States.

The lack of metaphors in the documents from the federal government discussing AIDS reveals a need for anthropologists to study other types of rhetoric and rhetorical tropes. When going into this research, I expected to find a large number of metaphors because they provide a way to simplify complex ideas. With a complex disease such as AIDS and the ramifications it had for American society, it would seem as though there would be a need to simplify it to some degree. However, upon further inspection, it makes sense why the Reagan administration did not try to simplify the AIDS epidemic. It is well known that Reagan did not discuss AIDS often. When Reagan did speak about AIDS, he never mentioned the complex social issues that the disease carried with it. Instead, he focused all his attention on how to stop it through moral values and individual action. There was no need to simplify AIDS for the American people because he never discussed the complex components of the disease. Ultimately these simple solutions

would do more harm than good, leading to the further marginalization of the risk groups associated with AIDS.

## **Conclusion**

The results of the coding yielded both surprising and expected results. Reagan's tendency to avoid harsh topics and instead only focus on light issues was demonstrated through his use of certain rhetorical tropes. The heavy use of emotive language is an excellent example of this. The Reagan administration did not want to discuss taboo topics for the time, such as homosexual sex and intravenous drug use. In order to avoid such topics, they employed emotive language to make Americans feel good about the state of the country and not question the words of the administration. The prevalence of other rhetorical tropes, such as quotations and passive voice, display the Reagan administration's lack of responsibility they felt towards ending the AIDS epidemic. Instead, they pinned a large amount of the responsibility on individual parents, educators, and scientists. While all people played a key role in fighting AIDS, the federal government could have played a larger role in fighting the disease. Perhaps if they had used rhetorical tropes the way Koop did in his *Understanding AIDS* pamphlet, the marginalization of certain groups would have been avoided.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

According to the CDC, between 1981 and 1987, 50,280 people in the United States were diagnosed with AIDS. Of those 50,280 people, 47,993 died from the disease (CDC 2001). While tens of thousands of Americans died, President Reagan stayed largely silent on AIDS with the American public. As Tina Perez and George Dionisopoulos have pointed out, the primary reason Reagan stayed silent for so long was his fear that speaking about topics such as homosexuality and intravenous drug use would normalize them (Perez and Dionisopoulos 1995, 22). Although I cannot prove that the members of the Reagan administration were aware they held biases against the risk groups associated with AIDS, through my analysis of their use of rhetoric regarding the disease, I have shown that they contributed to their further marginalization.

My research has focused on how marginalization can be studied through the use of rhetoric. During the height of the AIDS epidemic, the risk groups most in danger of contracting the disease, and those who already had the disease, were scapegoated by their community as well as their country. These risk groups included people who were already members of marginalized groups, but it also included anyone who had multiple sexual partners. The Reagan administration's use of individualized rhetoric further pushed this scapegoating by blaming individuals for the spread of the disease and making it solely up to the American public to stop its spread. This inevitably led to Americans scapegoating certain social groups. The administration's use of ceremonialization made the situation worse by keeping Americans from understanding the complex social issues the AIDS epidemic brought to the surface of politics. Americans were only told about the advancements that American scientists and public health officials were making. The use

of these two forms of rhetoric allowed Americans to further marginalize communities in the name of ending the AIDS epidemic.

Certain groups of people being marginalized due to the rhetoric of politicians is not a concept limited to just the AIDS epidemic in the United States. This same problem can be seen in more recent times with the COVID-19 pandemic. This disease originated in Wuhan, China. Due to this fact, many American politicians have started using racist and xenophobic rhetoric when discussing the pandemic. For instance, Tennessee Senator Bill Hagerty tweeted: “I’ve seen how communist China has operated for years, and I can tell you, what they’re trying to do right now with this Wuhan virus is the crime of the century” (Stop AAPI Hate 2020). This tweet not only incorrectly refers to COVID-19 as the “Wuhan virus,” it also effectively blames China for the spread of COVID-19 around the world. Additionally, former President Donald Trump has referred to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” numerous times (Stop AAPI Hate 2020). This rhetoric of blame has translated to a complete disregard for COVID-19 regulations in the United States, as well as an uptick in hate crimes against Asian Americans.

Perhaps one of the most devastating results of the pandemic is the increase in hate crimes against Asian Americans in the United States. On March 24, 2021, a 21-year-old white man murdered eight people at three different spas in Atlanta, Georgia (Fausett et al., 2021). Six of the eight people were women of Asian descent (Fausett et al., 2021). Although the police investigating the crime will not say whether or not the murders are a hate crime yet, many individuals believe these murders are symbolic of a rising number of Asian American hate crimes. This belief is not without evidence. According to the New York Times, the number of hate crimes committed against Asian Americans in New

York City jumped from three in 2019 to 28 in 2020 (Fausett et al., 2021). This rise in hate crimes is caused, in part, by the rhetoric of blame being spread by politicians like Bill Hagerty and former President Donald Trump. This is quite similar to the rhetoric used by the Reagan administration that effectively blamed the spread of AIDS on gay men and intravenous drug users.

Hate crimes against Asian Americans are not the only effect of politicians' rhetoric of blame regarding COVID-19. The lack of Americans following COVID-19 regulations is also an effect of it. According to anthropologist Lisa Hardy (2020), since the virus first started spreading in March of 2020, there has been an ongoing disbelief among many Americans that the virus is real. Additionally, many right-leaning individuals in the United States refuse to wear a mask because they see it as a violation of their rights (Hardy 2020, 656). This, coupled with a complete disregard for hygiene guidelines, Hardy argues is the manifestation of xenophobia against Asians (658). Her reasoning is that it is a part of Asian culture to wear masks and take other preventative measures to protect each other from disease. Many Americans refusing to do this symbolizes an unconscious form of xenophobia against Asians (658). This xenophobia and rhetoric of blame against Asian Americans are comparable to the blame gay men and intravenous drug users received during the AIDS epidemic. Americans, desperate to find someone to blame for the rapid spread of a disease, turn to the scapegoating of certain social groups. This, in turn, leads to that social group's further marginalization.

Politicizing diseases such as AIDS and COVID-19 do nothing except lead to government inaction and the deaths of thousands of Americans. Most of the Americans who died from AIDS were members of marginalized communities. This includes the risk

groups previously discussed, but also individuals who came from a low socio-economic status who could not afford to stay in a hospital or be treated for a disease. Examining the rhetoric of the Reagan administration when discussing AIDS is useful for understanding the ways in which certain communities can be further marginalized. This examination of political rhetoric can be applied to virtually any event, historical or current, that assigns blame to a certain group of individuals. Analyses such as this one are important because they can aid in demonstrating to individuals the power that a politician's use of rhetoric can hold. This power can be a good thing. However, it can quickly become negative, as this thesis has demonstrated. The rhetoric of politicians must be scrutinized on a deeper level in the future in order to prevent the scapegoating and marginalization of other social groups.

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