# “Anybody out there?!”

Henry Waxman and the Congressional response to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s

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# Introduction

On July 3, 1981 *The New York Times* published an article titled "rare cancer seen in 41 homosexuals" (K. Altman). One year later, on April 13, 1982, a meeting at the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center in Los Angeles was organized. Chairman of the subcommittee on Health and the Environment, Henry Waxman, called this meeting. To Waxman, a hearing was necessary to examine "an incurable form of cancer" that was "appearing in epidemic proportions among Americans, predominantly among young gay men." (Hearing April 13, 1982, 1). In this statement, Henry Waxman addressed the issue of AIDS and the disastrous effect it had on the gay community.

In the early 1980s, young homosexual men, primarily in cities like San Francisco and New York, started dying of a mysterious virus. Because the virus seemed to only affect homosexual men, the majority of the public did not seem overly concerned. The first cases of AIDS were reported among gay men and it did not take long before it became clear that anyone could get AIDS. The strong association of AIDS with homosexuality, as the group the disease struck hardest, however, remained.

The majority of politicians seemed to ignore AIDS as a health crisis. Henry Waxman, who held the first congressional hearing on AIDS, and continued to make AIDS a topic to place on the political agenda, forms an exception. In this thesis, a new perspective will be added to the debate on AIDS in the United States during the 1980s. Henry Waxman's political effort to tackle the AIDS epidemic differs from the popular notion that politicians ignored or dismissed the seriousness of the AIDS epidemic, and the position of homosexuals in society.

Henry Waxman, as chairman of the Subcommittee on Health and the Environment, was the first elected official to address the issue of "gay cancer'' (Hearing April 13, 1982). According to historian Dennis Altman, Waxman was a pioneer in putting AIDS on the political agenda. "The first significant congressional response came from Henry Waxman, a Los Angeles Democrat who has considerable clout in California politics and whose subcommittee of the House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce included, oversight of the Public Health Service.'' (D. Altman 112). Waxman has been described as a "congressional crusader on health issues and climate change" (Graham), and one of the most important Congressmen ever" (Corn).

Most of the secondary literature on AIDS in the U.S including *AIDS in the Mind of America* (D. Altman), *The Epidemic: a global history of AIDS* (Engel), *And the Band Played On* (Shilts), are insufficient in discussing Waxman's role. Within these works, Waxman is only briefly mentioned. The authors only discuss Waxman as the first congressman to respond to AIDS, but a further explanation of his efforts to tackle the epidemic are absent. The emphasis within these works remains with the image of AIDS as a 'gay plague' that received barely any attention from the government. This thesis

provides a necessary perspective on the continued effort of Henry Waxman in the political debate on AIDS.

A historical overview is necessary in order to understand why Henry Waxman is seen as "a pioneer," and how he differed from other politicians. A focus on gay rights explains the social position of homosexuals in society. In the 1980s, the association of AIDS with homosexuality made it difficult to address the issue. This difficulty of addressing AIDS is related to the process of acceptance of homosexuality that started around the 1960s. The decision by homosexual men to express their sexual orientation was met with resistance. In 1965, results from a public poll showed that 70 percent of the respondents believed that "homosexuals were more harmful than helpful" (Herek 41). This attitude was also present in politics. Some conservative politicians initiated legislation motivated by anti-gay sentiment. Senator John Brigs from Orange County, wanted to make teaching illegal for homosexuals. To Brigs, the idea that "putting homosexuals in classrooms with young boys was crazy. We don't allow necrophilia's to be morticians" (Scobie). These examples show that the position of homosexuals in society was characterized by discrimination and exclusion. In response, homosexuals felt a growing need to stand up for their rights and position in society. As a result, the gay rights movement originated in the 1960s.

Coinciding with the beginning of the gay rights movement, acceptance of gay life seemed to improve from the 1970s on. Gay Freedom Day became an annual event where homosexuality was celebrated. Journalist Rebecca Rosen mentions that the 1970s helped open up the way for a cultural transformation that no longer depicted homosexuals in a negative light but "celebrated homosexuality'' (Rosen). Gradually it may have looked like homosexuality normalized in U.S. society, however, a rise in conservative thought from the late 1970s onwards reversed this trend. For the gay rights movement, the growing popularity of moral conservative thought had problematic consequences. This particular form of conservatism coincided with "a demonization of gay lifestyles and the portrayal of gays as self-indulgent, irresponsible, and morally depraved'' (Engel 69). Moral conservatism seemed to have undone the steps towards the acceptability of homosexuality. The arrival of AIDS in the 1980s, also known as the 'gay plague' (Salyer), positioned the acceptance of gay life at an absolute low. AIDS was a godsend to moral conservatives who saw the disease as a result of the openness of homosexuality. To them, AIDS proved that homosexuals could not live their lives freely outside of the closet without hurting themselves.

AIDS, as a disease without a cure, already killed 120 people one year after the first cases were reported in May, 1981 (Hearing April 13, 1982, 1). Within the gay community, AIDS was a major crisis that dominated all the agendas. Desperate to bring attention to AIDS, gay activists worked to make AIDS a public issue. Unfortunately, it seemed that making AIDS a public issue was very difficult. The majority of the public did not seem too concerned with the 'gay plague,' simply because they believed it would not affect them. A perceived lack of response from the rest of the population, led to a feeling of solitude within the gay community. The support group "Gay Men with AIDS,"

formed in 1982, explains this feeling. “Gay Men with AIDS” had been founded on the notion that “others do not care about us” (Wright 1791).

This feeling of isolation is very important in the historical debate on the response to AIDS. The perspective from within the gay community is one of solitude. Larry Kramer, screenplay writer and gay activist, addresses the necessity for homosexuals to unite and fight against the epidemic. To Kramer, the dependence of the gay community upon others would kill them. “If all of this had been happening to any other community for two long years, there would have been, long ago, such an outcry from that community and all its members that the government of this city and this country would not know what had hit them” (Kramer). Not being able to rely upon the government thus resulted in a necessary reliance upon those within the gay community.

The gay perspective on the AIDS epidemic can be contextualized by looking at the other prominent perspective in the historical debate on AIDS. While gay activists blamed the government for their solitary struggle to battle AIDS, the government held its own view. Politicians for a long time seem to have depicted AIDS “as the concern of a particular pressure group rather than a health crisis” (D. Altman 178). Press secretary for the President, Larry Speakes also did not seem to view AIDS as a health crisis. On October 15, 1983, Speakes was asked for a response to AIDS. “Does the President have any reaction to the announcement – the CDC in Atlanta, that AIDS is now an epidemic and have over 600 cases?” The response of Speakes was: “What’s AIDS?” (Dreyfuss). To make matters worse, President Reagan did not speak in public about AIDS until 1987, six years after the first reports were made by the Centers for Disease Control (Reagan, 1987).

The debate on the political response to AIDS may be divided in two parts. First, there were politicians who ignored AIDS and refused to see AIDS as a national health crisis. There were also politicians who attacked AIDS and its main victims, gay men. This image derives from the fact that in the first year, all the reported cases of AIDS were found in gay men. A year later, however, it already became evident that AIDS was infecting other groups in society (Bishop). It must be emphasized that AIDS is a disease that can infect everyone. Unfortunately, the image of AIDS as a disease that merely affected homosexuals remained in the popular mind. As a consequence, it became very difficult to explain that AIDS was not confined to this group.

Religious and political conservatives, leading a larger block of conservative moderates, hindered the effort to address AIDS as a national health problem instead of a ‘gay disease’. This group began to attack homosexuality and homosexual behavior in “a concerted effort to demonize gay lifestyles and portray gays as self-indulgent, irresponsible, and morally depraved’’ (Engel 69). According to conservative and right-wing politicians, William Dannemeyer and Jesse Helms, AIDS had been a punishment for the behavior of gay men in America. They referred to the “Gay Plague,’’ or the bible, by stating that “God’s plan for man was Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve’’ (Engel 74). Unfortunately, the government did not just talk about AIDS in a negative manner. By 1980, 119 people had already dead of AIDS. Striking is the fact that these 119 cases counted for more than “all

of the deaths reported for toxic shock syndrome from the beginning of this reporting for this disorder up to the present, plus all of the deaths from the Philadelphia outbreak of Legionnaire's disease combined" (Hearing April 13, 1982, 8). The virus had already proven to be deadly, yet funding for AIDS research and services only started flowing two years, 1600 cases, and 600 deaths later (Lee 261).

The two perspectives on the response to AIDS in the U.S. include a lack of cooperation and a missing dialogue. Both parties seemed to have dealt with the epidemic in their own way. Gay activists united themselves in organizations and support groups and criticized the government for not caring about them, and the virus that was making more victims in their community each day. Politicians, primarily conservatives, were open about their stance on homosexuality. To them, AIDS was a 'gay disease' that did not need federal assistance because it did not affect the heterosexual majority (La ganga).

In order to claim that Henry Waxman provided a crucial addition to the debate on AIDS in the U.S., all three debates need to be investigated. The first part will focus on the gay community, the origins of the gay rights movement and the position of homosexuals in society. Because the political perspective is the other main part in this investigation, the second chapter will focus on U.S. politics in the 1980s. Finally, Henry Waxman will form the center of the final chapter. Together, these chapters provide an overview on the public and political homosexuality in the U.S. from the 1960s up until the nineties. The emphasis throughout this work, however, will remain with the AIDS epidemic.

# Chapter 1: Gay in the USA

*The first chapter consists of a historical overview on gay rights activism, the mainstream public debate on AIDS, and the gay community during in the United States (1960s-1980s).*

## 1.1 The Making of a movement

While the gay rights movement in the United States knows a longer history the 1960s proved to have been the period that brought great changes to the gay community and society in general. In the historical debate on the origins of the gay rights movement one particular event is seen as its starting point. Historian David Bronski in his book *A Queer History of the United States* mentions that "the Stonewall 'riots,' that took place in New York's Greenwich Village in 1969, symbolized the beginning of the gay rights movement in the U.S. (Bronski 27). Stonewall Inn had been a popular gay bar where homosexuals and lesbians came together to be themselves. Riots broke out at the bar one night, as police men conducted a raid there. The night after the riots, *The New York Times* wrote about "a rampage in Greenwich" where hundreds of young men injured four police men (New York Times 1969). In relation to the gay rights movement, the riots can be described in another way. The continuing oppression of gay life in the U.S. had reached its boiling point that night. When the police raided the bar, in response, primarily young gay men rose up and insisted: "all the oppressed have to unite" (Bronski 311). According to Bronski, this particular night forms the starting point for the gay rights movement in the U.S.

The Mattachine Society, that was founded at the time of the Stonewall Riots, became the first public gay group in the U.S. This organization laid the foundations for later gay rights organizations. Harry Hay, the founder of the Mattachine Society explained that, already in the 1950s, there was a need among homosexuals to create their own position in society. "In order to earn for ourselves any place in the sun, we must with perseverance and self-discipline work collectively . . . for the first-class citizenship of Minorities everywhere, including ourselves" (Cusac). Historian Eric Marcus in his oral history account *Making History*, disagrees with Bronski. To Marcus, the Stonewall Riots were merely a "clear starting point." The gay rights movement, according to Marcus needs to be seen as a "heroic forty-five-year struggle" starting roughly around 1945 (Marcus, preface). The exact origins of the movement remain difficult to indicate. In relation to this thesis, however, it is most relevant to emphasize that homosexuals have endured discrimination and intimidation for as long as they have openly expressed their sexual orientation. This openness of sexual orientation can be related to the 1960s, and therefore this era forms the starting point in this work.

The male-centered gay rights movement is more relevant in this thesis, but it is necessary to acknowledge that lesbians organized themselves as activists too. Besides gay rights activism led by homosexual men, from the fifties onwards, the lesbian movement also emerged. In 1955, the Daughters of Bilitis was founded as a social group (Bronski 280). In the popular image, gay activism

seems to have overshadowed lesbian activism. For example, Gay Freedom Day was changed to Lesbian & Gay Freedom Day in 1981. Eleven years after the first Freedom Day was held (Kuchar). This lack of attention seems to derive from the differences in approach. The fact that there were separate movements for both lesbians and gays, indicates that they wished to address their own issues. A closer look at gay rights organizations explains that there may have been a need among lesbians for their own separate movement. Gay activist Carl Wittman, wrote a gay manifesto on his perception of the gay movement. This paper was written from the "gay male viewpoint" and therefore was in no way "a manifesto for lesbians" (Wittman). According to lesbian-feminism, which became more popular in the 1970s, most of the gay rights organizations were indeed male-centered and focused on male-issues. As a consequence, both movements distanced themselves from each other (Pierceson 38).

The 1960s, as starting point for the emergence of the gay rights movement in this thesis, are not necessarily seen as the era of this particular movement. The 1960s are usually seen as the era of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. By focusing on the gay rights movement, a somewhat overlooked perspective can be added to this historical era. During the late 1960s, civil rights proved to have been a reoccurring theme. The African-American community won their long expected political struggle for equality and students were protesting America's invasion of Vietnam. The position of women also improved with the introduction of the 'Pill' and the founding of organizations such as the National Organization for Women, dedicated to move toward "true equality for all women in America'' (Friedan). The gay rights movement is related to the theme of civil rights because gays also experienced feelings of exclusion and inferiority. In response they also tried to improve their position in society. Law Professor and director of the Western Colorado AIDS project, Michael Brewer supports this statement by arguing that "no other group of people has had their private, consensual sexual behavior attacked and scrutinized as much as the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender population." He also added that the movement "transformed the landscape of American society, politics, sciences, academia, and theology'' (Brewer 546). Drawing further on Brewer's argument, this part focuses on the ways in which gays in the U.S. were isolated and what obstacles they had to overcome.

"Don't think you won't be caught, because this is one thing you cannot get away with." Detective John Sorenson spoke these words in front of an auditorium full of children in Dade County, Florida in 1966 (PBS, Stonewall uprising). In his speech, Sorenson made it very clear that homosexuality was illegal, and that homosexual behavior would not be accepted. In a frightening manner, Detective Sorenson spoke to young children, embedding a fear towards homosexuality. The Stonewall Riots explain how by 1969, homosexuals clearly were fed up with Sorenson, and those who shared his position. The riots succeeded in breaking "the spell of fears," when homosexuals took a microphone in their hand and proclaimed: "I am publicly announcing my homosexuality in the hope that it will help to end discrimination against homosexuals" (Faderman 183). By openly expressing

their sexual orientation, homosexuals opposed the stance of people like John Sorenson, but they also disobeyed the law that read that homosexuality was illegal.

One year after Stonewall, Carl Wittman wrote a pamphlet titled "A Gay Manifesto." In this pamphlet, Wittman as a gay man who "fled" to San Francisco, wrote about his perspective on gay life in the U.S. According to Wittman, the manifesto was an attempt at "raising a number of issues, and presenting some ideas to replace the old ones." (Wttman). In relation to Witmann's manifesto, the 1970s proved to be a very fruitful period. Gay rights activism responded to the manifesto in several manners. Up until 1973, homosexuality in the U.S. was considered a psychiatric disorder. The American Psychiatric Association, publishes the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). The DSM included homosexuality until 1973, officially recognizing it as a mental disorder. Several medical professionals supported this title because they believed that heterosexuality was "the biological norm." Others felt that homosexuality was "unnatural, a sickness, a dysfunction" (Ridinger 214). From the early 1970s, this label was increasingly being criticized. Within the gay community, the stigmatizing statements on homosexuality eventually reached its boiling point. The continued discrimination and stigmatization of gay life sparked protest from gay activists. Activist Ronald Gold, fiercely attacked the APA and DSM in his speech "Stop It, You're Making Me Sick" on May, 9 in 1973. Partly because of the growing resistance toward the DSM from within the gay community, several prominent psychiatrists on the committee of the APA got together to review the DSM. These meetings brought a positive result for the gay community. In 1973, it was decided that homosexuality was "no longer considered a psychiatric disorder." Instead it should be defined as a "sexual orientation disturbance'' (Times, 1973). According to Judd Marmor, a Los Angeles psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, the removal of homosexuality from the DSM paved the way for a growing acceptance for homosexuality among the public. "People who wanted to discriminate against homosexuals could no longer say, "Look the psychiatrist call it an illness. It's considered a sexual perversion. And we can't have people who are sick working for us." The removal from the DSM according to Marmor meant that "there was no reason why, a priori, a gay man or woman could not be just a healthy, just as effective, just as law abiding, and just as capable of functioning as any heterosexual." (Marcus, 254).

Besides the label that was put on homosexuals stating they were all mentally insane, so-called sodomy laws intervened in the private lives of homosexuals. These laws led to the "persecution of private sexual acts between consenting adults.'' Support for the sodomy laws were based on arguments such as "public morals and decency" that homosexuals supposedly threatened (Weinmeyer). In the late 1960s, reform was brought to the sodomy laws through the Model Penal Code, an initiative by the American Law Institute. The code initiated the legalization of homosexuality. Reform would be brought to criminal law "according to contemporary reasoned judgment.'' For a large part, because of the Model Penal Code, twenty-four states had reformed their sodomy laws and legalized homosexuality by 1977 (Canaday). Besides the victory of the Model Penal

Code, some states decided to hold onto their sodomy laws. Texas for example continued to ignore the rights of homosexuals to engage in relationships. Until the Supreme Court ruled the "criminalization of sexual relations between persons of the same sex unconstitutional" in 2003, homosexuality was considered illegal (Barnett). The willingness to apply the Model Penal Code showed to have been very dependent on the political climate of the different states. More conservative states such as Texas, have shown less support for homosexuality since they held on to the constitution and refrained from law reform.

As long as conservative states kept homosexuality illegal, they succeeded in keeping the gay community isolated. Harvard Professor J. Halley, confirms the isolated position of gays in the U.S. He argues that "sodomy laws served to subordinate gay identity and superordinate heterosexual identity'' (Brewer 548). When twenty-four states decided to abandon their sodomy laws by 1977, it may be argued that these states wished to move forward in decriminalizing homosexuality in America. While homosexuality was no longer considered illegal, homosexuals were not actually enjoying the same status as heterosexuals in the U.S. In response, like they had already done before, the gay community started organizing themselves in order to improve their position in society.

According to gay historian Dennis Altman, the 1970s were the time during which homosexuals were being recognized as a "social, cultural and political minority" (Altman D. 13). The following examples explain how homosexuals were being recognized, but also how this position was established because of their own efforts. In politics, steps were taken when gay rights leaders organized a meeting at the White House in 1977. Two years later, a national march on Washington was organized. Around 75,000 to 100,000 gay rights supporters marched along the National Mall in an effort to put gay rights on the political agenda (Marcus 258). The meeting with White House representatives was another way in which gay activists presented their demands to the government, and put their issues on the political agenda. Members of the National Gay Task Force, who wished to "build power, take action and create change" sent out a powerful message (National LGBTQ Task Force). "It is time that a government we helped choose and a government we helped pay for no longer discriminate against us. We want to talk and we want to talk in the White House." The White House replied to this message by agreeing to the first ever meeting with Gay and Lesbian leaders. Together they would discuss "the issue of homosexuality" (Constanza). As the first ever meeting with the White House, this event may be seen as a milestone in gay rights activism, that opened up opportunities for cooperation with the federal government.

To Harvey Milk, an openly gay elected official on the board of supervisors in San Francisco, the White House meeting was insufficient in getting the gay issue on the political agenda. In 1978, Milk sent out a statement in the official Pride Program that criticized the federal government and President Carter in particular, for their effort in the gay rights struggle. Milk's statement read: "How long, Jimmy, before you speak out for the human rights of all Americans? … Until you do you are just Jimmy Carter; when you do, you will be our president and a true leader for human rights" (Milk,

1978). In his speeches, Milk openly addressed the issue of homosexuality in the U.S. He did not shy away from delivering fierce criticism. Because of his position on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Milk was able to push the political agenda on gay rights in his state. During Gay Freedom Day Milk did exactly that. Milk argued that homosexuals in America were "tired of silence from the White House'' (Flippen 170). Harvey Milk was not the first openly gay elected official in the U.S. In 1974, Kathy Kozachenko, a lesbian won a seat on the Ann Arbor city council (Faderman 393). Though Milk was not the first openly election official, his election as the first openly gay elected official on the board of supervisors in San Francisco, was a big step for homosexual life in the U.S. The election made him a "symbol of hope to gays and all minorities" (New York Times, Nov 9).

While Milk addressed the status of homosexuals in the U.S through political protest, Gay Freedom Day provided a different form of protest. Over the years, Gay Freedom Day, now known as Pride, grew into an annual event, celebrated in cities across the country (Kuchar). Freedom day was still a form of protest because political messages were included. More important was the festive character of the day. As a form of gay rights activism, Freedom Day allowed the gay community to rid themselves of the stigmatized position they found themselves in. It also gave the gay community an opportunity to openly celebrate their sexual orientation, even if it was just for a day. The festive character of Gay Freedom Day attracted large crowds of both activists and non-activists. In this way, the event had an audience. In front of this audience, gay rights activists could "make their beliefs and alliances known" (Kuchar).

As gay rights activism achieved more goals during the late 1970s, its growing popularity also attracted opposition. Two important legal issues explain how opposition against gay rights was expressed. Anita Bryant, a pop singer, perhaps became the most prominent leader of the "antigay backlash" that erupted in 1977. Her "Save Our Children" campaign, successfully repealed a legislative order that prohibited discrimination against lesbians and gay men in hiring and housing in Dade County, Florida (Marcus 258). Bryant's campaign clearly included strong components of religion and conservatism. These ideological features had been on the rise during the late 1970s. Bryant spoke of a superior law of God, and a violation of the civil rights of heterosexuals, by homosexuals. Though she has been criticized for her "lack of decency, and fairness of people who are different" (Howard), Bryant's success caused great concern in the gay community.

Despite Bryant's successful campaign, California's Proposition 6 formed a new battle that would have a different outcome. Initiated by the State Senator from California, John Briggs, Proposition 6 was based on his idea that "putting homosexuals in classrooms with young boys is crazy. We don't allow necrophilia's to be morticians" (Scobie). This radical type of thinking about homosexuality was met with great resistance within the gay rights movement. Harvey Milk in particular made it his cause to defeat the initiative. According to him, Proposition 6 was in line with the "same abuse of civil rights that gave us witch hunts and McCarthyism" (Field 2). The campaign titled "No on 6" organized by lesbian and gay activists lobbied fiercely against the initiative to remove any teacher who was found

"advocating, imposing, encouraging or promoting homosexuality" (Bronski 325). The lobby effort was successful. It led to the successful defeat of the proposition with 58.4% on November 7, 1978 (Ballotpedia).

As a result of the constant urge to improve their position in society, gay activists achieved remarkable goals. Their growing popularity, however, also attracted opposition. Primarily from within the conservative right, a group that expressed resentment toward homosexuality. According to them, homosexuals were threatening the traditional Christian values, when they no longer lived their lives inside of the closet (Stewart 3). These setbacks were necessary for the gay rights movement to establish their position as a social, cultural and political minority in society. Tragically, the 1980s would form another great challenge. The newly acclaimed status of homosexuals would be challenged by a mysterious virus that was rapidly and increasingly causing victims in their community.

## 1.2 The Public and the Media

Around the same time as the annual Gay Freedom Day in America in 1980, the first signs of a crisis that would disastrously change the lives of homosexuals were already present. It would be the last Gay Freedom Day in San Francisco, capitol of the gay community (Shilts 15), to have other topics dominating its agenda than AIDS.

In response to the dramatic effects AIDS had on on society, and the gay community in particular, gay activists started organizing themselves. In San Francisco, the *Shanti Project* became the first AIDS support group (Wright 1790). *Shanti* was originally founded as a cancer support group, however, when AIDS struck significantly hard in San Francisco, its focus shifted to AIDS (Wright 1790) Bobbi Campbell, a homosexual nurse from San Francisco, was diagnosed with AIDS on October 8, 1981. As an open homosexual, Campbell wanted to address AIDS and urge for action. His stance made him known as known as the AIDS "Poster Boy" (White). As a response to being labeled as "victims" the members of *People With AIDS,* founded in 1983. The organization was founded to get rid of the image of people with AIDS as passive, helpless, and dependent upon the care of others (PWA). This need to come forward as activists who fought against AIDS, instead of passive and helpless individuals, originated out of a need among gay activists to come up for themselves. Michael Callen, a musician, together with Michael Berkowitz, a writer and sex worker, formed a support group called "Gay Men with AIDS" in 1982. Their message heavily relied upon the need among homosexuals to care for themselves. This view of caring from themselves was motivated by the thought that "OTHERS DO NOT CARE ABOUT US" (Wright 1791). Gay activist and screenplay writer, Larry Kramer, expressed this feeling of isolation among activists and the need to speak out, in an article titled "1,112 and Counting" published in 1983. Kramer addresses the association of AIDS with homosexuality by stating: "If all of this had been happening to any other community for two long years, there would have been, long ago, such an outcry from that community and all its members that

the government of this city and this country would not know what had hit them" (Kramer). As a result, the gay community founded their own support groups that were focused on self-empowerment, because others weren't going to help out.

The outcry of prominent gay activists who felt they were fighting a solitary battle, was met with agreement instead of denial by the public and the media. For example, one journalist for the *New York Times Magazine* wrote that AIDS was something that gays 'had coming.' "As they waste away, many AIDS patients begin to reflect of their lives, sometimes feeling they are being punished for their reckless, hedonistic ways" (Faderman 418). Patrick Buchanan, journalist for the *New York Post* spoke of AIDS as "nature striking back." He also argued that gays should be banned from food handling, donating blood and childcare" (D. Altman 59). By describing AIDS in such a manner, journalists were making it easier to depict AIDS as a gay issue, instead of viewing it as the health crisis it was.

Both homophobia and the mystery surrounding AIDS had consequences for gays. Two years after the first reports on what later became known as AIDS, it became clear that AIDS might be "transmissible to the heterosexual population" (Ran 44). Before that time, homosexuals were stigmatized and discriminated because the words "AIDS" and "Homosexuals" came to be synonymous (D. Altman 58). Author Edmund White experienced how his positive status changed people's view of him. "Mothers didn't want me picking up their babies. People didn't want to kiss you on the cheek" (Landau). For a long time, not much was known about AIDS, except that the first victims were homosexuals. As a consequence, the mystery surrounding AIDS provided fertile ground for speculation.

Larry Kramer assigned the problematic response to the epidemic, that primarily affected gay men, to the rest of the society such as the media, that represents public opinion. While Kramer's perspective, to an extent, represents the gay community, other perspectives need to be investigated in order to conclude how the gay community was viewed upon, and how AIDS changed this view. Acceptance of gay life is related to the way in which the public viewed this group in society. The view of the public is picked up on by the media, therefore both the media and public opinion are investigated to find out what the main issues were concerning acceptance of gay life in the U.S.

The opinions from within and outside of the gay community provide insight that is necessary to conclude what major thoughts and views were present during the 1970s and 1980s. Public polls are useful in researching what is on the minds of Americans because the results represent the general view of the American population. In relation to homosexuality, these polls indicate that homosexuality was viewed in a rather negative manner from the 1960s till the 1980s. A Harris Poll from 1965, indicated that 70 percent of the respondents believed that "homosexuals were more harmful than helpful to American life" (Herek 41). A Gallup Poll that gathered data from 1977 till 1986 concludes that the approval rate on homosexual relationships remained under fifty percent, differing from 43% in 1977 to 33% in 1986 (Gallup). And another poll taken with results from 1973 till 1991 showed that overall,

roughly 70 percent of 19,413 the participants agreed with the statement "homosexuality is always wrong. (Loftus 767).

The negative view on homosexuality by the heterosexual community is confirmed through personal accounts by gays. Eric Marcus' book *Making History* provides an oral history account by homosexual and lesbian men and women who share their story. Especially in the media the issue of homosexuality was almost forbidden. Randy Shilts, author of *And the band played on*, recalls that the media had barely reported on 'gay stuff.' "They'd cover the news stuff, like when Harvey Milk was elected supervisor, but that was about it" (Marcus 233-234). When Shilts, as an openly gay man, applied for a job at a TV station he was confronted with the way the media, in accordance with the public, actually thought about homosexuality. He was told that he could not get the job because "people would change the stations if they saw somebody on TV who was public about being gay" (Marcus 235). Nancy Walker, a lesbian woman who had worked for *Gay Community News*, a gay newspaper in Boston also argues that the media barely covered stories on homosexuality throughout the 1970s. "With a few notable exceptions, the television networks, daily newspapers, and newsmagazines avoided gay issues" (Marcus 291).

In contrast with the stories in Marcus' book, Rebecca Rosen's article for *The Atlantic* on homosexuality in the media, mentions that the 1970s "represented a remarkable period of transformation for gays and lesbians'' (Rosen). Rosen's article states that several movies such as *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* (1971) and *The Certain Summer* (1972) helped open up the way for a cultural transformation that no longer depicted homosexuals in a negative light but "celebrated homosexuality.'' This celebration of homosexual life seems absent according to Shilts and Walker (Marcus). A few notable mentions such as the election of Harvey Milk, were considered newsworthy and received media attention, but to speak of a "celebration" seems a bit over exaggerated in relation to Shilts' and Walker's perspective on the media.

Another perspective on the media, that combines journalism with popular opinion, is a column by William Raspberry for *The Washington Post.* As a journalist, Raspberry wrote a column titled "Open season on gays?" in 1978 (Raspberry). In the text, he explains how several referendums across the country led to the repeal "of an ordinance prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual preferences." Raspberry warned that "the combination of genuine concern about the dangers of homosexuality and the participation of respected personages in the repeal effort is leading to a sort of open season on homosexuals, providing release for all the pent-up anti-gay hostility." The "open season" Raspberry discusses, undermines Rosen's optimistic perspective on the media and homosexuality. The article shows how the rights of homosexuals were denied, and that positive thoughts toward homosexuality were threatening to be replaced with hostility.

The celebration of homosexuality mentioned in Rosen's article, seems problematic in relation to the 1980s. Movies that included homosexuals and did not depict them in a negative light, may be seen as progressive, however, the almost complete absence of gay life in the media during the 1980s

indicates a lack of dedication from the media to really take a stance and make a difference. Right at the time when Randy Shilts was hired as the first openly gay news reporter at a mainstream newspaper, The Chronicle, the first signs of a "new gay disease had been detected just weeks before" (Marcus 236). The response to AIDS by the U.S. media seems to prove that, besides being relatively supportive of homosexuality by covering it throughout the 1970s, homosexuality was still not accepted and considered worthy of attention.

Aron Ran and David Rogers, both medical professors, mention that the media did "little to encourage a swift public response." When the first reports of AIDS came out in 1981, AIDS was characterized as a 'gay disease' and not a threat to the general public. "The press essentially ignored the topic for almost two years. AIDS was viewed as a gay story that did not deserve general attention" (Ran 44). James Curran, professor of epidemiology at the CDC during the 1980s recalls a similar response by the media. "During the initial year after the fist reports of AIDS, when the term 'gay plague' was commonly used, the disease received relatively little attention from the mainstream media, the public, or politicians. By the end of 1982, however, it was clear that others were at risk for the disease, and what had been complacency turned into serious concern, even panic" (Curran).

## Concluding

The late 1960s and 1970s marked several changes that helped the gay community confirm their position in society, and to an extent, dissolve their isolated position. The legal position of gays improved when states adopted the Model Penal Code, and the removal of homosexuality from the DSM invalidated a certain subordinate position of gays. Attention from the media also indicates that gays in the U.S. were becoming more accepted. Media outlets "celebrated homosexuality'' through movies and interviews. On the other hand, the oral history accounts by Randy Shilts, depict a less optimistic view on the acceptance of homosexuality during the 1970s. This perspective counters Rosen's argument about a "celebration of homosexuality" in the media (Rosen).

In relation to the 1980s the growing acceptance of gay life was expressed in short-lived achievements that seemed to merely have had symbolic value. While the previous era included important changes in the lives of homosexuals, the arrival of the 1980s seemed to have reversed these liberating efforts. The 1980s form the center of this investigation, therefore a historical background and an overall view of the public perception on homosexuality is necessary. The political debate will form the center of the next chapter. It will be explained how the gay community was seemingly fighting a solitary battle against "the most fatal infectious disease ever seen" (La Ganga).

# Chapter 2: Politics (1977-1989)

*This chapter consists of an analysis of the political climate in the U.S. from 1981 onwards. Covering the presidency of Carter, the election of President Reagan and the Congressional debate on AIDS.*

## 2.1 Reagan takes office

"Because of both President and Mrs. Reagan, we started a national conversation, when before, nobody talked about it'' – Hillary Clinton, 2016 (Collins).

Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's statement on the perceived response by the Reagan administration to the spread of AIDS was inaccurate. It seems to show that even the most prominent politicians struggle to accurately recall the AIDS epidemic and the political climate of the 1980s. In hindsight, it may seem rather strange that a president refrained from openly addressing an epidemic that infected and killed thousands of, primarily homosexual, citizens. Remarkably, President Reagan did not issue an official statement on AIDS until 1987, six years after the first reports on AIDS. Tom Ammiano who lost his partner to AIDS, responded to Clinton's statement by emphasizing the necessity to remember that, unlike Clinton's statement, "the response of the Reagan administration was very, very slow" (La Ganga). To emphasize the difference between then and now, a historical background that focuses on politics and society is necessary to understand the position of gays in the U.S. and the effect AIDS within this community.

It may be argued that up until the late 1960s, the legal position of gays was ignored. So-called sodomy laws intervened with the private lives of homosexuals since they led to the "persecution of private sexual acts between consenting adults,'' while supporters argued that the laws protected the "public morals and decency" homosexuals supposedly threatened (Weinmeyer). This chapter will focus on the most relevant aspect of the U.S. government in relation to homosexuality: AIDS and gay rights. As the first chapter is written on gay rights activism, this chapter will consist of an analysis of the presidential response and the political climate. The stance of gay activists who spoke of a notion of isolation and a perceived lack of governmental response can only be confirmed or countered through an analysis of the federal government. Therefore, this chapter will provide an answer to the question on how the government responded to gay rights, and the AIDS epidemic in particular.

Historian Jonathan Engel explains how the rise of conservatism reflected in the political response to AIDS. "Religious and political conservatives, leading a larger block of conservative moderates, began to attack homosexuality and homosexual behavior in a concerted effort to demonize gay lifestyles and portray gays as self-indulgent, irresponsible, and morally depraved'' (Engel 69) This supposedly negative attitude toward homosexual life in the U.S. will be further explored in this chapter.

In order to put the governmental response to gay rights activism in perspective, the transition between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan as President of the U.S. is important. Because social policy is most relevant in this thesis, a comparison between Reagan and Carter helps to understand their stance on gay rights. The President of the U.S. also represents the thoughts of the majority of the public, and at the same time holds the position to influence this thought and demand further action.

The political climate in the 1970s seemed to move in a liberal direction. The election of Jimmy Carter as president of the United States in 1977, symbolized this liberalization because his election marked a "new period of unprecedented political access for lesbians and gay men'' (Bernstein 549). Under his administration, Jean O'Leary, a former nun, became the first openly lesbian delegate at the Democratic National Convention (Woo). And the 1978 Civil Service Reform Act was designed to "restructure the central institutions of Federal personnel management'' (Carter). The act also "did outlaw discrimination against private, non-job-related behavior" (Filipen 169). While Carter's administration worked to move forward, activists demanded a bigger effort from the government in order to strengthen their position in society.

On the one hand, Carter's presidency is often perceived as somewhat troubled because of the Iran hostage crisis and the economic crisis of the time. On the other hand, Carter's social policy may be seen as relatively successful. Under the administration of the more liberal Jimmy Carter, measures were taken to improve the position of gays in the U.S. One of the books written on Jimmy Carter's presidency, discusses homosexual rights and notes that during his presidency, besides the Civil Service Reform act of 1978, "the Internal Revenue Service granted homosexual organizations tax exempt status," and "the department of Defense ended its policy of dismissing homosexual soldier's dishonorable discharges" (Filipen 169).

When Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, the relatively tolerant political stance towards gays in the U.S. was taken in a new direction. As the electorate moved away from the liberal politics of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan proved to be an ideal candidate because "the election of Reagan, who had actively courted the conservative religious vote, delighted the Religious Right and caused alarm in lesbian and gay circles" (Bernstein 555). Reagan had greatly profited from a conservative electorate during the election. In response to Carter's liberal presidential term, a larger electorate of conservative republicans casted its vote for presidential candidate Reagan in 1981. Conservative thought had been, and still is, drained with opposition to homosexuality, abortion, and other liberal facets that had become more approachable topics for discussion under the Carter administration. By voting for Reagan, this group dismissed Carter's policies. As fierce opponents of homosexuality in general, the arrival of AIDS came as a godsend for those who helped to elect Reagan. Conservative politicians resented Carter's liberal policies and worked hard to undo these efforts. Historian Daniel William's book on the Christian Right explains that the long history of conservatives within the political system helped shape the climate of the 1980s. The conservatives, according to Williams, gained control of the Republican party because they "changed the agenda of the party," focusing more on social aspects

such as, civil and gay rights (Williams 3). In relation to the Republican party, the Christian Right was crucial to "shift to the right on social issues" (Williams 8). This shift to the right caused the Republican party to take a stance against the liberal attitude of the previous administration.

Reagan became president at the time of an economic crisis. In his inaugural address he noted that the "United States are confronted with an economic affliction of great proportions. We suffer from the longest and one of the worst sustained inflations in our national history" (Reagan, 1981). More concerned with the economic policy because of the ongoing crisis, *Reaganism* was brought to America. *Reaganism* was an economic strategy "based on the strengthening of the military while weakening the role of the state in protecting social welfare and civil rights" (Altman, D 27). This weakening of civil rights deeply affected the gay community. Besides civil rights, economic reform would also have great consequences on the way in which the federal government tackled the AIDS epidemic, which was becoming a bigger problem. The administration reduced the size of the government, and the federal budget proposed "massive cuts to health programs" (Waxman 52). The U.S. health programs were coordinated by the Public Health Service (PHS). Because of these cuts and the structure of the PHS, a swift response to a health crisis became much more difficult. The PHS can be divided in to the Centers for Disease Control, National Institutes of Health, and the Food and Drug Administration. Victoria Harden, former director of the NIH History Office, explains that the NIH was unable to accurately respond to the outbreak of AIDS. The National Institutes of Health was, and still is, "the federal government's principle agency for support of biomedical research." In reality this means that the NIH conducts research to "discover new knowledge in relation to health" (Harden 30). Within the NIH, research for specific chronic problems was institutionalized, covering the most common diseases such as cancer, and heart and lung disorders. Among these subgroups, each covering their 'own' chronic disease, AIDS did not hold such a position. Another problem of the NIH had been their focus on "acquisitions of long term knowledge not on public health crises" (Harden, 31-33). It took the NHS twenty months after the first alert of AIDS to allocate the first funds. This was related to the organizational features but, also a seemingly homophobic staff, which included doctors who suggested that "gays have their tubes tied (D. Altman 48-49). The unfortunate timing of budget cuts to health programs, have made it that much harder to response swiftly to the outbreak of AIDS. As a consequence, research and treatment became more difficult.

President Reagan's policy shifted away from civil rights and social policies. Its primary focus was based on strengthening the economy. Gay activists were confined to a marginal position because homosexuality and AIDS, were neglected by the President. On October 15, 1983, President Reagan's press secretary Larry Speakes, was asked for a response to AIDS. "Does the President have any reaction to the announcement – the CDC in Atlanta, that AIDS is now an epidemic and have over 600 cases?" The response of Speakes was: "What's AIDS?" (Dreyfuss). Speakes' response dates from one year after the first reports on AIDS were published by the CDC. Besides ignoring the seriousness of AIDS, the federal budget was also not considering AIDS as something worthy of funds since "the

Reagan Administration did now acknowledge the need for funds specifically for AIDS until may 1983" (Lee 3). Already two years after AIDS was first reported, President Reagan did not specifically know of AIDS, nor did the President saw the need to acknowledge funding for research on the disease.

In relation to gay rights, no official document will provide an answer on the question about Reagan's stance on homosexuality. While the absence of an adequate response to the AIDS epidemic has given Reagan a negative image, there is no real proof that this response was deliberately aimed at homosexuals. The decision by the Reagans to abandon their friendship with actor Rock Hudson, after he was diagnosed with AIDS, however, makes a negative stance on homosexuality more plausible. In a desperate request, the dying actor reached out to his former friends Nancy and Ronald Reagan. Nancy Reagan responded to Hudson's request by commenting that his disease "was not something the White House should get in to." After Rock Hudson's death, it took many more victims and two entire years for President Reagan to publicly address AIDS on May 31, 1987 (Geidner). By ignoring AIDS for a long time, Reagan according to historian Altman, "helped prevent a full-scale national response to AIDS and made it that much easier to see AIDS as the concern of a particular pressure group rather than a health crisis" (D. Altman 178). While AIDS in America did primarily infect gay people, and was seen as a "gay cancer" or the "gay plague" (Salyer), arguing that Reagan was a homophobe who supported these notions, is insufficient. What seems more likely is the fact that the Republican Party thrived in the early 1980s, because of the support of the Christian Right. Given their stance on gay rights, the Republican Party wished to stay away from gay rights in order to maintain the support of the Christian Right. As a consequence, Reagan remained silent on AIDS, because of its association with homosexuality. Tragically, the decision to remain silent as president of the United States on AIDS, did nothing to slow down the epidemic in anyway.

In 1987, President Reagan publicly addressed AIDS for the first time. While Geidner stated that May 31, was the first time that Reagan spoke publicly about AIDS, earlier that month the President had already delivered a statement on the establishment of the National Commission on AIDS. To Reagan, AIDS had become "one of the most serious health problems facing the world community." The establishment of national commission would "help to ensure that we are using every possible public health measure to contain the spread of the virus" (Reagan, 1987). Six years and 50.378 cases of AIDS later, President Reagan was convinced of the necessity to take action (AmFar).

The speech on May 31, carried a hopeful message in which the President seemed to respond to the gay community who had felt, so far, that they were fighting a solitary battle. The National Commission would bring together "America's best ideas on how to deal with the AIDS crisis" (Reagan, 1987). For the gay community, Reagan had a special message. He praised the "Shanti Project" for its compassion which should be "duplicated all over the country" as a symbol of the best tradition of caring. The President also distanced himself from the notion that he saw AIDS as a "gay disease (Waxman 54). "I don't want Americans to think AIDS simply affects only certain groups.

AIDS affects all of us" (Reagan, 1987). With this statement, Reagan distanced himself from the idea that the federal government did nothing against AIDS.

In that same year, gay activists who had united themselves in an organization called ACT-UP, attacked the government because they believed President Reagan's words were false. With signs that read "We DIE and THEY Do Nothing," they pressured the government to take action. ACT-UP demanded funding for research for and access to medication (Faderman 431). In making the distinction between "We" and "They," gay activists heavily relied on the idea that AIDS was a 'gay disease' that only affected them. From 1982, however, it already became evident that AIDS was also affecting other groups in society (Bishop). It seems to show that the longer time that it took for the President to address AIDS. And the spread of the disease to the non-homosexual community, did not dissolve the feeling of isolation among gay activists. To them the response from the President seemed to confirm that AIDS was something the government would not deal with until heterosexuals started to die. As journalist Chris Geidner, already explained in relation to Rock Hudson's death. When longtime friend of the Reagan's, Rock Hudson was dying of AIDS, First Lady Nancy Reagan turned down his final plea for help (Geidner). The federal government, and the Reagan's in particular, decided to "look the other way" as long as AIDS did not affect the majority of the American people (La Ganga).

## 2.2 Congress and AIDS

The political response to the AIDS epidemic was problematic. The Reagan administration ignored AIDS, and other politicians seemed to frame the epidemic as an isolated event rather than the health crisis it actually was. Among the different groups of politicians, there was one group in particular who made it that much harder to address the issue of AIDS. This group was most prominently represented by two politicians: Jesse Helms and William Dannemeyer. Both were rightwing conservatives who openly expressed their resentment towards the epidemic and homosexuality in the U.S. Former Republican Senator Jesse Helms from North-Carolina, was known for his remarkable speeches in which homosexuals formed a very prominent target. When Senator Helms was introduced to an AIDS prevention comic book in 1987, his response was: "the subject matter is so obscene, so revolting, it's difficult for me to stand here and talk about it. I may throw up" (Greenhouse).

Helms' thoughts on homosexuality and AIDS were shared by fellow congressman William Dannemeyer. Already in 1981, Dannemeyer "grasped the nature" of the AIDS epidemic in the U.S. In Congress, Dannnemeyer proposed a solution for the crisis. This solution was not based on research or prevention. Instead Dannemeyer suggested that gay men should be rounded up and quarantined on an island in the South-Pacific (Waxman 54). The Republican representative of Orange County, also published a book titled *Shadow in the Land (*Dannemeyer), to express his stance on homosexuality. In his work, the theme of religion is very important. Dannemeyer explained his opposition towards

homosexuality by referring to a loss of Judeo-Christian ethic. This ethic threatened to disappear because of a new emerging society, where homosexuals no longer lived their lives in the closet (Stewart 3). It was this change in society that shocked many. Gay life in the U.S. seemed to change abruptly. Whether gay life in fact did change is questionable, but a major difference did occur in the expression of homosexuality from the late 1970s onwards. Homosexuals in the U.S. became more open about their sexual orientation, from the 1960s onwards. Consequently, this caused concern in the conservative community. The arrival of AIDS in the gay community came as a godsend for conservatives like Helms and Dannemeyer. They viewed the epidemic as a result of the behavior of homosexuals. According to them, AIDS proved that homosexuals were unable to live freely outside of the closet without hurting themselves, and others in society.

A clear image about what caused AIDS, how it could be prevented and treated remained absent for years after the first cases were reported. In 1984, three years after the first reports, the CDC discovered the HIV virus (Cowley). The time it took for officials to reach crucial steps in the process of dismantling AIDS created room for speculation. Different stories about AIDS emerged. Assistant secretary from the department of Health and Human Services, Dr. Edward Brandt, explained that because of a concern about the "limitations of transmissibility" a feeling was present to "protect against the worst" (D. Altman 64). The need to protect people against AIDS together with a lack of information on the spread of the disease, resulted in radical measures.

The feeling to protect people who were not infected with AIDS resulted in "mass firings of gays" and discussions about quarantining gays (D. Altman 64). As an ineffective measure, quarantining further stigmatized people living with AIDS. Results of a poll in Los Angeles showed that 51 percent of 2,308 people supported quarantining of AIDS patients in 1985 (AP). Initiatives like *Proposition 64* by political activist Lyndon H. LaRouche Jr. in 1986, also included "universal screening and isolating or quarantining." The quarantine measure was considered as a serious effort to tackle the epidemic. LaRouche's idea was supported by "700,000 fearful Californians" (Kirp). Besides the idea of quarantining homosexuals, congressman William Dannemeyer made the list of myths surrounding AIDS even longer. In the film *AIDS what you haven't been told* from 1989, Dannemeyer discussed the possibility of AIDS "to be transmitted through the respiratory system" (Ford). These statements imposed a fear on the American public which hindered the effort to fight these incorrect notions. Even though Surgeon General Everett Koop announced in 1987 that "quarantine has no role in the management of AIDS because AIDS is not spread by casual contact" (Hearing May 1987, 6), the tone seemed to have already been set.

The openness of gay life meant that homosexuals found their way out of the closet many wished to keep them in (Stewart 3). Gay Freedom Day, first held on the streets of San Francisco in 1970 (Kuchar), created the annual stage for the celebration of freedom of sexual orientation. Sexual freedom became more visible as as a consequence of the emergence of bathhouses and sex clubs that created more "opportunities for casual sex." Tragically, sexual freedom for homosexuals who

frequently visited bathhouses, came at a cost. These places quickly became centers of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV (D. Altman 14). When "gays began to see frequent anonymous sex as the bedrock of gay liberation" (Engel 13), they had not been prepared for the consequences of their behavior. The outbreak of AIDS caused an enormous crisis in the gay community. The crisis was dealt with by homosexuals in different ways. There were those who were unconvinced and continued to have unprotected sex, resisting the message that warned them. And then there were gay men who were confronted with the loss of their loved ones because of the disease. The most relevant group of gays men in relation to this thesis were the activists. This group consisted of those who united themselves in groups such as Gay Men's Health Crisis and ACT-UP. They translated their "anger and grief about the AIDS epidemic" toward politics and the public (Faderman 429).

The presence of conservative politicians who openly opposed homosexuality and viewed AIDS as a gay plague, created a climate where addressing AIDS and homosexuality was difficult. In order to create a problem in society, it is necessary for others to acknowledge this problem. The politicians who refused to discuss AIDS as a health crisis, made it more important for other politicians to take a different stance. Only this group of politicians, highly supported by interest groups, could influence the political agenda, and participate in the fight against the epidemic and discrimination of homosexual life. To return to the quote by Hillary Clinton at the beginning of this chapter, the misconception about the political response to the AIDS epidemic needs to be readjusted. In this chapter, two very prominent examples indicate how a group of conservative republicans responded to the AIDS epidemic. By focusing on Congress and the AIDS epidemic it will be investigated whether Helms and Dannemeyer were merely irrelevant outsiders, or if they carried a broadly supported political message.

When Ronald Reagan became president in 1981, the Republican party took over the senate. The Democrat party maintained its majority in the House. This structure remained throughout President Reagan's two terms (History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives). In the House, several democratic representatives opposed the administration's plan for AIDS. Ted Weiss, a democrat from New York, was elected in Congress in 1976. Weiss became chairman of the Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations and Human Resources. As chairman Weiss criticized the administration's regulation of medication. By putting pressure on the federal government Weiss wished to "allow drugs proven effective in combatting AIDS to reach the marketplace sooner" (Dao). The struggle to get drugs approved and available has been a long and difficult journey. While Weiss had the authority as chairman to press for more funds for research, he was not alone. Weiss had been responsive to the gay activist organization ACT-UP, which had made AIDS medication its main issue. Their concern with the Food and Drug Administration, the agency that regulated drugs, was picked up by Weiss in Congress (Faderman 437). In this way, Weiss dismissed the administration's policy, and agreed with gay activists on the regulation of AIDS medication. Ted Weiss is an example of how (democratic) representatives worked together with gay activists.

In 1981 President Reagan appointed Dr. C. Everett Koop as surgeon general; the spokesperson on public health. Koop's appointment was probably motivated by his personal views that opposed abortion and homosexuality. When he became surgeon general his perspective seemed to change. While the Reagan administration saw AIDS as a 'gay disease' Koop spoke of a "no-fault disease," and he promoted the use of condoms as a preventative measure. Dr. Koop was a conservative republican but he did not allow his own political opinion to get in the way of public health. Dr. Koop died in 2013 and is remembered for "choosing to stand for the public health above all" (McCabe). Besides the efforts of individuals like Koop and Weiss, the conservative republicans who opposed action against the epidemic hold a prominent place in the literature. Faderman's historical work "The Gay Revolution" covers the AIDS epidemic, and in particular the political response. When she discusses politics, Faderman only mentions the "bad cops," or anti-gay politicians (Faderman 437). Bronski in his "Queer history of the United States" argues that the political climate had been represented by "a wave of antigay sentiment across the nation" and that this "perfectly suited to the rhetoric of the religious and political right" (Bronski 333). This group of politicians seems to dominate the historical debate on the political response to AIDS in the 1980s.

The reluctance to support a 'gay disease' and the opposition of republicans who kept ignoring AIDS as a 'health issue,' had consequences for the appropriation of funds. Funds for AIDS research were not acknowledged until May, 1983. A group of conservatives who opposed homosexuality, were not going to address the necessity to take action. As a result, "two years went by, 1600 cases were reported, more than 600 people died, and thousands were infected with the virus before the Administration allocated funds directly for AIDS research and services" (Lee 261). By 1983, the National Institutes of Health had spent $12 million on AIDS research. Since fiscal year 1981, the NIH had spent $11,2 billion on "other medical research." Of the total budget for medical research, "only one-tenth of the NIH budget has been spent on AIDS by 1983 (Hearing august 1-2, 1983, 38).

The establishment of the Presidential Commission on HIV on June 24, 1987 also proves how difficult it was to support the battle against AIDS. Within the commission, members were present who held conservative ideologies. The internal organization was also problematic, "There was no executive director and few staff. To top it off, in early October of 1987, just three weeks after the commissioners were officially sworn in, the chairman and vice chairman resigned" (Watkins 849). These examples seem to indicate that measures were taken to tackle the epidemic, however, the effectiveness of these measures seems disputable.

## Concluding

The election of President Reagan coincided with a rise in conservatism in the U.S. The electorate moved away from the liberal politics of Carter and wished to return to a society in which Christian values were central. This transition greatly affected the gay community, because it meant that they were requested to return back into their closets. In Congress, conservative republicans like Helms and Dannemeyer greatly influenced the political debate on AIDS. Their conservative arguments on how to deal with the epidemic were of course met with resistance, but they also influenced the federal response to AIDS. For example, the first sums of money started only flowing, three years after the first AIDS victims had been reported.

The longer it took for President Reagan to openly speak about AIDS, the more freedom conservative politicians had to spread rumors, and the longer it took to pressure for more research on the virus. The democratic politicians who did address AIDS and the necessity to take action seem to have been overshadowed by conservative republicans who opposed this idea. The growing prominence of gay activism in the late 1980s also seems to overshadow the effort of those politicians who supported their cause. ACT-UP for example directed itself particularly at Washington out of "anger and grief about the AIDS epidemic" (Faderman 429). They seem to have set the agenda for congress, although, congress was less responsive than they hoped.

The overall view on politics and AIDS presents a sober and tragic picture. It took thousands of victims before the President decided to address the issue, and other politicians used AIDS to stigmatize and isolate the gay community even further. The following chapter will provide an alternative view on AIDS and politics. By focusing on one man in particular, it will be argued that unlike the common view, there was indeed within politics a voice that listened to the gay community and pressed for action from the first years that AIDS was reported in the U.S.

# Chapter 3: Waxman as chairman (1979-1990s)

*This chapter consists of an investigation on Waxman's political career, primarily as Chairman of the subcommittee on health and the environment, and his continued effort to address AIDS in Congress.*

## 3.1 Becoming Chairman

According to historian Dennis Altman, Waxman was a pioneer in putting AIDS on the political agenda. "The first significant congressional response came from Henry Waxman, a Los Angeles Democrat who has considerable clout in California politics and whose subcommittee of the House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce included, oversight of the Public Health Service'' (D. Altman 112).

Henry Waxman was born in the eastern part of Los Angeles, California in 1939. Both his parents had emigrated from Moldavia to escape the anti-Jewish pogrom in the early 1900s. Escaping the violence in their own country, Waxman's parents moved to California. From a young age, Waxman already affiliated himself with politics. His family had a very liberal and democratic background. Waxman's father was an "ardent Democrat, who worshipped Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal" (Waxman 15-16). Growing up, Waxman adopted his father's political preference. As a student of political science at the University College of Los Angeles, he joined the Young Democrats Club (Waxman 19). Studying Politics and actively participating in the political system at his University, it was no surprise Waxman decided to expand his career in this particular field.

In 1968 Waxman ran for state assembly which became his "first great political victory" (Waxman 29). This political victory may be assigned to Waxman's progressive political stance. The Young Democrats positioned themselves in a very liberal manner. Primarily in the year 1968, when protests against the Vietnam War reached its boiling point, Waxman and other members of the Young Democrats openly opposed the war (Bradley). This liberal attitude was very popular among young ambitious students who were affiliated with politics. This generation of future politicians challenged the "Democratic establishment" from the late 1960s onwards. Waxman held a significant position in this group, that is also known as the "Watergate Babies" (Stoller). These "babies" formed the generation of students who opposed the Vietnam War, supported Civil Rights Movement and wished to "rid the nation's capital of the kind of corruption and dirty politics." In 1975, the "Watergate Babies" arrived in Washington D.C (Stoller). The previous year Waxman had started plotting a congressional campaign (Waxman 42). The House of Representatives was up for re-election in that same year, and the election of "a younger generation tried to dismantle the antiquated seniority system" was going to be changing the old ways (Waxman 45). Waxman's first position in Congress as Chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, gave him the responsibility over the legislative

jurisdiction on most health issues (Waxman 46). Health policy according to Waxman would allow him to "make the maximum difference" (Georgetown Law). His liberal political stance also reflected in his view on health policy.

When Waxman was elected to the State Assembly of California, Ronald Reagan as governor of California. Their strategies proved to be very different already. Reagan wished to shrink the size of government and cut government funding on California's medical program: Medi-Cal. Waxman on the other hand was a great supporter of Medi-Cal. When he became chairman of the Health Committee, he would work hard to prevent further medical budget cuts (Waxman 39).

Waxman's political ambitions remained with health throughout his career. Because this thesis focuses on Waxman and the AIDS epidemic this does not mean that Waxman must merely be remembered for this part of his career. Political magazine, *The Atlantic* remembers Waxman as a "congressional crusader on health issues and climate change" (Graham). A few notable accomplishments from Waxman's political career include the Children's Health Insurance Program, which extends coverage to millions of low-income children; anti-tobacco, food safety and food-labeling laws" (J. Weisman). These examples indicate that Waxman's career was filled with different issues he tried to tackle. In accordance with *The New York Times*, Waxman may be named "a diminutive Democratic giant whose 40 years in the House produced some of the most important legislation of the era" (J. Weissman). Bearing these accomplishments in mind, the need to narrow down this investigation led to the decision to focus on Waxman's policy on AIDS during the 1980s.

When the chair of the Subcommittee on Health and the Environment announced his retirement in 1979, Waxman decided to run for that position. (Waxman 50). His election became a historical one. His election as Chairman of the Health and Environment, was the first time that someone had won a subcommittee chairmanship out of the line of seniority (Waxman 55). This historical election also shows that a new generation was making some changes in Congress, as a "young idealistic liberal" like Waxman took office (Stoller). His new position as Chairman on a congressional committee gave Waxman a certain degree of authority. To become chairman, an elected official in Congress can run for this position. Several factors explain how Waxman, as chairman of a congressional committee, held a position of authority which enabled him to influence the political agenda. The subcommittee on Health and the Environment, belongs to the committee on Energy and Commerce. It is the oldest legislative committee in the House of Representatives, and covers a broad jurisdiction. In relation to Waxman's chairmanship, his subcommittee is responsible for public health (E&C.gov: https://energycommerce.house.gov).

Waxman's election as Chairman of the Subcommittee on Health and the Environment in 1979, coincided with the arrival of AIDS in the U.S. An overview of secondary sources provides insight in the perceived role of Waxman in this debate. *The Atlantic* wrote about 'the heroic story' of the battle against AIDS in Congress (Green). Waxman played a pioneering role in confronting the government to respond to the AIDS epidemic. Another article titled "Why Henry Waxman was one of the most

important Congressmen ever" described Waxman as a "progressive crusader for decades" (Corn). Timothy Westmoreland, a professor of law and staff member of the Subcommittee on Health and The Environment from 1979 till 1994, worked together with Waxman for many years. He looks back on their work together in an article for *Politico* magazine. Westmoreland recalls that Waxman was a very suitable person in responding to the AIDS epidemic (Westmoreland). Waxman "called the first hearing" and "held hearing after hearing as it became clear that this was an epidemic" (Westmoreland).

The first cases of a disease later known as AIDS were reported in West Hollywood, Waxman's hometown. This meant that the epidemic was rapidly causing more victims in the area that shaped Waxman's political career. As discussed in the previous chapter, the political response to AIDS in the early 1980s differed from dismissal towards treating AIDS as a public health issue, to using the disease as an excuse to attack homosexuality in the U.S. Waxman's political efforts, however, show a different image. His continued effort to address AIDS and press for action, are investigated through an analysis of Congressional hearings. These hearings provide insight into the political debate, and show how Waxman stood out in this debate.

## 3.2 How Waxman changed the political response to AIDS in the 1980s

Being a liberal democrat in a time of conservatism, and a critical voice in a time of ignorance and denial, Waxman may be considered an outcast. His stance as Chairman of one of the most important Congressional subcommittees, has made Waxman a noteworthy and very important figure in the political response to AIDS. Providing the "first significant congressional response" (Altman 112) in the early 1980s, Waxman placed AIDS on the federal agenda and tried his hardest to keep it there.

Waxman was not alone in the battle to make AIDS more visible in U.S. society. Other politicians, for example Ted Weiss, a democratic representative and chairman of the subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations and Human Resources worked hard to get approved drugs on the market to combat AIDS (Dao). Unfortunately, these good willed politicians seem to have been overshadowed by rightwing conservatives such as Dannemeyer, Helms, and LaRouche. Ronald Reagan also received far more attention from scholars on his response, or lack thereof, to the AIDS epidemic. The popular media seems to have forgotten about this part of his legacy as president; a view that was painfully confirmed by Hillary Clinton's response to Nancy Reagan's death (Collins). A different perspective on the response to AIDS, in this case the political response, is necessary to emphasize the actions of a politician like Henry Waxman who stood up while others did not.

Waxman's position as Chairman of the Subcommittee on Health and the Environment enabled him to influence the political agenda. As Chairman, Waxman held oversight hearings, and organized the political agenda of his committee. Congressional hearings proved to be a powerful tool in the fight against AIDS because, "hearings were a golden opportunity to bring public attention to an issue,

which instantly made it a higher priority for Congress'' (Waxman 45). The hearings Waxman chaired were held in Washington D.C., and representatives from the different states were present. Waxman would start the hearings with an opening statement in which he included the agenda for that particular hearing. Besides attending hearings from the Subcommittee on Health and the Environment as chair, Waxman also attended other hearings as a representative. For example, in 1983, Waxman attended a Hearing before the subcommittee on Government Operations titled "Federal Response to AIDS" (Hearing August 1, 1983). In this way, Waxman not only held hearings on AIDS, but also attended hearings that discussed the topic, and participated in the debate.

If he wished to place AIDS on the political agenda, Waxman first needed to bring attention to the issue. In placing AIDS on the political agenda through Congressional hearings, Waxman altered the notion that homosexuals in America were fighting a solitary struggle. By raising awareness Waxman pointed out that AIDS was a "horrible disease that afflicts members of one of the Nation's most stigmatized and discriminated-against minorities. The victims are not typical, Main Street Americans. They are gays, mainly from New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco" (Hearing April 13, 1982, 2). In this statement, Waxman responded to the outbreak of AIDS one year after the first reports came out. By the end of 1981, 159 cases of what later became known as AIDS, were reported by the Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2011). *The Aids Bureaucracy* a book by Sandra Panem discusses the congressional response to AIDS, and includes Henry Waxman. According to Panem did Dr. Brandt's labeling of AIDS as the Public Health Service's number one priority in 1983 directly spur congressional action (Panem, 31). While it is true that Waxman together with Representative Ted Weiss organized congressional hearings after Dr. Brandt's statement, however, Waxman had already been organizing hearings before this time. The statement by Waxman above was given in April, 1982, a year before the PHS labeled AIDS as its "number one priority." The statement by Waxman proves that he, in an early stage of the epidemic, was already pressing for action.

In starting a political discussion on AIDS and the position of homosexuals in the U.S., Waxman distanced himself from a large number of politicians, mainly conservatives, including the President, who ignored the issue. By allowing specialists, patients, and officials to report on developments surrounding AIDS, Waxman's hearings would make AIDS a real disease. Bobbi Campbell was invited to translate "cold data into flesh and blood and tears," and to speak "of the men, my brothers, who have Kaposi's sarcoma and other illnesses" (Hearing April 13, 1982, 45). In creating a platform that allowed people with AIDS to share their story, Waxman tried to alter the "social acceptability of the individuals affected with it" (Hearing April 13, 1982, 2). Waxman's decision to allow openly homosexual men to speak about AIDS in congress, made the disease more visible. These hearings also gave homosexuals a platform to speak out, and initiated a discussion on the acceptability of AIDS and homosexual life. Inviting Bobbi Campbell, an openly homosexual who proclaimed himself as the AIDS 'poster boy' (White), Waxman also criticized the acceptability of homosexual life of certain politicians. While Jesse Helms would not speak about homosexuality because the subject

was too difficult to discuss because he worried that he "may throw up" (Greenhouse), Waxman did not shy away from discussing homosexuality and AIDS, and to spur on the acceptability of this topic in Congress. The problematic situation of AIDS in the U.S. is made clear in one of Waxman's opening statements during a congressional hearing in 1982.

> "I intend to fight any effort by anyone at any level to make public health policy regarding Kaposi's Sarcoma or any other disease on the basis of his or her personal prejudices regarding other people's sexual preferences of lifestyles" (Hearing April 13, 1982, 2).

Providing a platform for gay men with AIDS to speak about the epidemic, Waxman's hearings contradicted the feeling of solitude among gay activists. This feeling was most prominently expressed by gay activist Larry Kramer. In 1983 Kramer published an article titled "1,112 and counting." In this article he criticized the political response to the AIDS epidemic and he argued that he was "sick of our electing officials who in no way represent us" (Kramer). What Kramer seems so have overlooked was the efforts that Waxman had already been making to address the necessity to take action. For example, his statement from April 13, 1982. This hearing show that the political debate on AIDS was already starting, a year before Kramer's publication.

The silence Larry Kramer spoke of does not apply to Henry Waxman's actions who did discuss AIDS in Congress, however, it can be assigned to the political response in general. This view is shared by the former Executive director of the Gay Rights National Lobby, Stephen R. Endean. He spoke during one hearing about AIDS within the gay community, and noted that the response from the federal government had been "slow and insufficient" (Hearing, August 1-2, 1983, 38). Waxman's work, however, forms an exception. Endean praised Waxman's efforts, and shared his opinion that the response to AIDS was very much determined by its victims: gay men. (Hearing, August 1-2, 1983, 40). An *ABC News* item broadcasted on May, 19, 1983, also supports the argument that Waxman's efforts helped to contradict the notion of an isolated struggle led by the gay community. *ABC news* reporter Geraldo Rivera pointed out that a lack of response was very much present within the media and politics, but mentioned that Waxman stood out because he "has been very critical of the government's handling of the epidemic." During this interview, it was acknowledged by Waxman himself that the "government did not respond as we should have to this public health crisis." Remarkably, on national television did Waxman comment that this lack of response was related to the association with homosexuality as he stated:

> "We saw when Legionnaire's Disease came into the public awareness that there was immediate clamor for action. Had this disease afflicted children or members of the Chamber of Commerce, I'm sure the Reagan administration would have been breaking down all doors in order to push the government on all fronts to deal with it" (Hearing August 1-2, 1983, 81).

Waxman recognized the intensity of the AIDS epidemic and the necessity to take action, while other politicians and the administration shied away from the problem. His efforts were met with gratitude from the gay community. Kramer's argument of AIDS as a solitary struggle of gay men, to an extent, is correct. But looking at Waxman, he cannot be included within this group of politicians who in no way represented the gay community.

Waxman exposed the federal response to AIDS and explained how a lack of awareness made a proper response to the epidemic impossible. If Waxman wanted to receive funding for research and treatment, he needed to put AIDS on the agenda first. The lack of response from the federal government, with a President who shied away from AIDS and conservative politicians who opposed funding a 'gay plague' made doing so difficult. In the book *The AIDS Bureaucracy* the issue of federal funding for the AIDS epidemic is discussed. The discrepancy in Congress related to funds is explained. On the one hand, AIDS was "the nation's number one priority." On the other hand, the most asked question during congressional hearings on AIDS was: "How could AIDS be the nation's number on priority if it receives so little funding?" (Panem 76). This question remained in Congress, and Waxman, as the chairman responsible for health, thus AIDS, did not mean to leave this question unanswered. The first congressional hearing chaired by Henry Waxman on President Reagan's proposal for the federal government's expenses on health, indicated Waxman's fierce opposition towards *Reaganomics*. At a time when AIDS was arriving in the United States, Waxman as chairman of the subcommittee on health and the environment was confronted with a presidential plan to "reduce the Federal Government's funding of Medicaid and the impact that would have on those Americans dependent on the program" (Hearing March, 10,1981, 1).

The fact that AIDS was not a 'normal' epidemic reflected in the federal expenses. A statement by Dr. Curran, coordinator of the CDC indicates that the federal response to AIDS on funding for treatment was seriously lacking in relation to previous epidemics. Curran mentions that in April of 1980, 300 cases of *Kaposi's Sarcoma, Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia*, or both of these disorders, had been reported to Centers for Disease Control, and that 119 people were already dead. Striking is the fact that these 119 cases counted for more than "all of the deaths reported for toxic shock syndrome from the beginning of this reporting for this disorder up to the present, plus all of the deaths from the Philadelphia outbreak of Legionnaire's disease combined" (Hearing April 13, 1982, 8). The virus had already proven to be deadly, yet funds specifically for AIDS research were not provided until May 1983 (Lee 261).

Waxman's subcommittee was confronted with a deadly epidemic and an unwilling administration. Chairman Waxman had the authority and tools to put pressure on the administration to fight "the most fatal disease ever seen" (La Ganga). The Reagan administration had made no real effort to fund AIDS research, therefore, Waxman's subcommittee proved crucial in changing the administration's mind. Stan Matek, President of the American Public Health, emphasized Waxman's

role. “We cannot look to this administration for such leadership. We cannot look to a President whose economic priorities would leave us with less coping capacity, rather than more. We have to look, Mr. Waxman, to your committee” (Hearing April, 13 1982 46). Matek’s comment indicates that the Reagan administration had not properly responded to the AIDS epidemic so far. It also shows that Waxman as chairman had the power to take action when the administration did not.

The major issue concerning the administration’s response to AIDS had been the budget cuts and accompanying lack of funding for federal health expenses. During hearings of his subcommittee Waxman openly criticized this issue. The CDC had lost “its ability to respond to problems of disease and contagions.” Not agreeing with the suggested budget cuts, which included a loss of 30 percent of funding for the NIH and 27 percent of the CDC, Waxman instead pressed for more federal funding for AIDS research (Hearing April, 13, 1982 46). During a hearing in 1983 named ‘Public Health Emergency Act,’ Waxman proposed bill *H.R. 2713*. Waxman introduced the bill “to amend Public Health Service Act to authorize appropriations to be made available to the Secretary of Health and Human Services for research for the cause, treatment, and prevention of public health emergencies” (Hearing May, 9, 1983 4). Waxman’s proposal received criticism from the secretary for health and human services Dr. Brandt, who suggested that *H.R. 2713* was unnecessary because the “ample authority to take all the actions necessary to deal with public health emergencies” was present (Hearing May 9, 1983 7). Waxman in return explained that a fund especially for health emergencies would prevent suffering of cuts elsewhere in the health department, and would prevent miscalculation. The last point referred to Dr. Brandt’s statement that “the AIDS emergency has cost more money or we have spent more money at least on it than we originally anticipated” (Hearing May, 9 1983 24). By proposing a bill which created a fund especially for public health emergencies, Waxman tried to prevent another emergency like AIDS which cost a lot more than anticipated. The bill proposed by Waxman to speed up the federal response to a health crisis eventually did become law on July, 13, 1983 (Congress). The Public Heath Emergency Act, or Bill H.R. 2713, would provide funds in case of a public health emergency, seemed like a measure to avoid the “budgetary process,” however, no funds were ever appropriated (Lee, 264-265). The bill has not yet been used in practice, however, the idea of funding for public health emergencies were not abandoned by Henry Waxman. In a way, *H.R. 2713* paved the way for the Ryan White CARE Act, an emergency care act specifically drafted for people living with HIV and AIDS.

With H.R. 2713 passed, Waxman continued his struggle by focusing on federal expenses regarding AIDS funding. Margaret Heckler as Secretary of Health and Human Services from 1983 to 1985 had made AIDS her “number one priority” (Frontline). An interview with Heckler in 2006 presents a different view on the administration’s approach to AIDS.

> "During the Reagan years, $5.7 billion was spent on research and on the AIDS problem. So he (President Reagan) did speak about AIDS, and in fact, he used the very words that I used from the beginning, which was AIDS is the highest priority of the Department of Health and Human Services. That I had established" (Frontline).

According to Heckler, a huge sum of money was spent on research and president Reagan had been involved in the fight AIDS from the start. Waxman's hearings seem to contradict Heckler's statements as Waxman personally criticized her work as secretary.

> "Secretary Heckler said that the AIDS crisis was the No. 1 public health emergency facing this Nation. When I have seen that she treats the No. 1 public health emergency by rejecting the requests of the NIH and the CDC and her own scientists for more funds, I sure would hate to be suffering from what she would call the No. 2 public health emergency, because obviously that is even of lesser priority" (Hearing September 17, 1984 115).

In this statement Waxman rejected the administration's response to AIDS by noting that the epidemic was in no way treated as a number one priority. Waxman pointed out a few things that are crucial to support his argument on why AIDS was not considered a number one priority. In June, 1981, a virus later known as AIDS was discovered by the CDC. It took the administration until April, 1982 for "money starting to flow" (Hearing May, 9, 1983 21). Waxman himself pointed out the lack of response from the administration by commenting: "we did not see NIH giving any money into the flow of contract and grants until last month, which is 2 years after we discovered this whole question, and we realized what a public health danger we had" (Hearing May, 9, 1983 32). When money finally started to flow into AIDS related research, the next problem was related to preserving this flow. John O'Shaughnessy's activities as budgeter for the administration were fiercely attacked by Waxman who pointed out that Shaughnessy's work as evaluator of the budget concluded that "the money (for AIDS research) was not needed" (Hearing May, 9, 1983, 105). Strictly connected to the administration's stance to cut back on governmental spending, Shaughnessy rejected an "urgent request for $56 million" for AIDS research in 1984 (Hearing May, 9, 1983, 113). By repeatedly pressing for more funding, and criticizing the administration's response, Waxman not only exposed the necessity to take swift action but also the bureaucratic problems which seemed to have made a fast response impossible.

By inviting Dr. Koop and Dr. Brandt, U.S Surgeon General and Surgeon General of the Public Health Service, Chairman Waxman probed to alter the image that had been created by politicians like LaRouche and Dannemeyer. According to Timothy Westmoreland, a staff member on Waxman's subcommittee, Waxman stood out because he met with "people living with AIDS," while politicians like LaRouche and Dannemeyer "were calling for quarantine and wearing rubber gloves

(Westmoreland). When a solution remained out of sight and different stories emerged about the cause and prevention of AIDS, an environment of uncertainties was created. Uninfected individuals were confronted with incorrect information and measures spread by politicians. Consequently, they distanced themselves even further from the gay community, which formed the most prominent group of AIDS victims. Homosexual author Edmund White, recalls how others would distance themselves from him because of the fear of AIDS. "Mothers didn't want me picking up their babies. People didn't want to kiss you on the cheek. People certainly didn't want to have sex with you, especially other gay people. It was very isolating and demeaning" (Landau). The early association of AIDS with homosexuality greatly affected the position in society. In 1985 *Time Magazine* wrote about an "open season on gays," and a nationwide poll showed that 73 percent of the people in het United States considered that homosexuality was wrong (Engel 45). Waxman recognized the consequences unawareness would have for both AIDS victims and non-infected individuals, and tried to alter this during his congressional hearings.

The difficult task of altering the image surrounding the AIDS epidemic is related to the constant struggle Waxman and his subcommittee faced against politicians who considered AIDS as a 'gay plague' (Salyer). This struggle also took place within the medical field. Although officials like Dr. Brandt and Dr. Koop acknowledged that AIDS was not spreading the way conservatives proclaimed, a lack of cooperation from within Public Health Services complicated the struggle of raising awareness. During a hearing on September 17, 1984, Waxman criticized Secretary of Health Margaret Heckler's statement that AIDS was the number one priority and a public health emergency. Waxman argued that AIDS as a number one priority, in reality had resulted in the dismissal of requests of the NIH and CDC for more funds.

> "I think the Secretary has acted irresponsibly. To turn down the request of the scientists in order to avoid asking for more money seems to me has done a disservice. And I think every day there are death that stand as a momentum to this colossal irresponsibility –not to go along with the requests for more funds to deal with this public health crisis" (Hearing September 17, 1984, 113-114).

In this statement Waxman publicly condemned the efforts, or lack thereof, by the PHS, the institute responsible for the allocation of funds related to AIDS research. Gay Rights National Lobby director, Endean connects the issue of AIDS as the number one priority and its actual response to the same argument made by Waxman.

Endean noted that Waxman was correct when he said:

> "There is no doubt in my mind that if the same disease had appeared among Americans of Norwegian descent, or among tennis players rather than among gay males, the response of both the government and the medical community would have been different" (Hearing August 1-2, 1983, 40).

Waxman did not shy away from criticizing the federal response to AIDS. He explained how a lack of acceptance for the gay community in society was the cause for this problematic response. Even though Waxman himself was part of the government, he was aware that changes were necessary in Congress. If Congress could change the way they viewed homosexuality and AIDS, the public could follow this example.

## 3.3 Ryan White CARE Act

Viewing AIDS as a 'gay disease' progressively became more difficult. As AIDS spread across the U.S. it also started affecting non-gay individuals. Historian Dennis Altman has acknowledged that in the Western world, AIDS "has been primarily experienced by male homosexuals." Consequently, this shaped the "entire discourse surrounding the disease" (Altman, 21). In 1983, however, it became clear that AIDS could no longer be considered a 'gay disease.' *The New York Times* reported that AIDS was spreading to all people in society.

> "AIDS also struck Haitian men and women, intravenous-drug users, female partners of drug users, and infants and children. AIDS has become the second leading cause of death - after uncontrollable bleeding - in hemophiliacs, and, most recently, a number of surgical patients who have received blood transfusions have contracted AIDS, raising fears among some observers about the nation's blood supply" (Henig).

One significant case altered the view on AIDS as a 'gay disease.' Ryan White, a boy from Indiana put "the face of a child on AIDS" (Johnson). Ryan had hemophilia, a blood disease which causes the blood to clot in an abnormal manner. People with hemophilia therefore bleed for a longer time than others, both internally and externally (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute). Ryan, a young boy needed to get several blood transfusions because of his condition. Tragically, one of his blood transfusions caused him to contract HIV. His HIV status caused Ryan White to endure stigmatization, a common feature of the disease. His school banned Ryan from attending anymore classes when they found out he was HIV positive. "For months, he had been forced to follow his seventh grade class

lessons through a telephone hook-up at home." On April 8, 1990, Ryan died of complications of AIDS at the age of 18 (Johnson).

White's dead may be seen as a new chapter in a political debate on the health response to HIV and AIDS. In relation to Ryan White, Waxman pursued his political effort to keep HIV and AIDS high on the political agenda. In 1990 Congress passed the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resource Emergency (CARE) Act." According to Patricia Siplon, Professor of Political Science, "Representative Henry Waxman provided the original outline for the House version" (Siplon, 796). After all his hard work in the early 1980s, which put AIDS on the political agenda, Waxman, together with other politicians, succeeded in drafting a bill that would focus on HIV patients in particular. A year before a bill would become law that specifically dealt with HIV and AIDS patients, the CDC announced that the number of reported AIDS cases had reached 100.000 (CDC 1989).

Initiating the first congressional hearings in 1981, Waxman worked for almost ten years on brining attention to AIDS. In a way it may be argued that Henry Waxman paved the way for the passage of an Act designed specifically for people living with HIV and AIDS. *Politico* magazine explains that his persistence was characteristic for Henry Waxman as a politician.

> "He was playing a long game … I really can't think of a lot of people who piece by piece have put together the kinds of complicated and important things that he has, just by sticking to it over a long period of time and chipping away at it" (Rogers).

Waxman's continued effort to address AIDS in Congress ultimately helped the passage of the Ryan White CARE Act and changed the debate on the epidemic.

The Ryan White CARE Act was an important milestone for people living with HIV and AIDS in several manners. First, the bill would provide help in certain areas were the prevalence of HIV was higher than elsewhere. "The bill deals with the health disaster brought to a few American cities. Like the Hurricane Hugo and the San Francisco earthquake, the human tragedy of AIDS in a number of disproportionately impacted cities requires federal assistance" (Siplon 797). In this way, the CARE Act provided emergency relief to cities like Los Angeles, Atlanta and Chicago (Siplon 801). By dividing the amount of relief among different cities based on the HIV infections, the CARE Act provided relief for medical institutions. According to Waxman did the CARE Act establish "outpatient services in many cities that previously depended on hospital to care for AIDS patients." In this way, HIV patients would have additional locations where they could go for medical care. The CARE Act created "accessible clinic sites in many places that once required people with AIDS to travel across town or even across States (Hearing April 5. 1995, 2).

Besides providing additional clinics where people living with HIV could get treatment, the Ryan White CARE Act also made healthcare more affordable for this group. In 1989, Waxman warned that President Bush Sr. would make budget cuts in the Medicare program. The proposed $5

billion cut in the Medicare Program would "severely damage the Medicare Program" (Hearing March 7. 1989, 38). To Waxman the budget cuts would heavily affect the low-income Americans, whose health would be jeopardized through the "already seriously underfunded" health programs. With the enactment of the CARE Act, the budget cuts could not reach the special funds that CARE Act received. These funds made "prescription drugs available to the poor or near-poor in States that once helped only people who met the narrow limits for Medicaid eligibility." And places "for poor people to go for counseling, testing, and preventive treatments that can keep them healthy longer" were established (Hearing April 5. 1995, 2).

Accessibility and affordability of healthcare for people living with HIV in the U.S. are achievements Waxman, for a large part, made possible. The establishment of the Ryan White CARE Act, however, did not mean that Waxman's work was over. He continued to warn Congress about the consequences the HIV epidemic could have. Funds were crucial as Waxman explains that HIV was becoming "an epidemic of poorer and poorer people. The CARE Act provided these people with care and coverage, but the budget was simultaneously getting "thinner and thinner." If people do not get access to healthcare early on, HIV poses an even bigger problem. Many people do not know that they have HIV until they are already very sick, and this caused them to need acute care, which is more expensive than early on treatment (Hearing April 5. 1995, 2). Partly due to the persistence of Waxman, the Ryan White CARE Act now "provides assistance for hundreds of thousands of low-income and uninsured people with HIV and AIDS" (Green).

## Concluding

The position that makes Henry Waxman the central figure in this thesis is that of Chairman of the subcommittee on Health and the Environment. It needs to emphasized that besides his chairmanship, Waxman has also been very active in different aspects of U.S. politics. Several different articles explain that Henry Waxman was important to Congress because he managed to get things done. Waxman has been described as a "progressive crusader for decades" (Corn), and *The New York Times* called him "a diminutive Democratic giant whose 40 years in the House produced some of the most important legislation of the era" (J. Weissman).

His political achievements include the "Children's Health Insurance Program, which extends coverage to millions of low-income children; anti-tobacco, food safety and food-labeling laws" (J. Weisman). In this work, however, it will be argued that Waxman must be remembered for his political efforts on getting AIDS on the political agenda. In a time of conservatism, Waxman as a Democratic liberal differed from many other politicians, including President Reagan. Providing the first significant congressional response, Waxman placed AIDS on the federal agenda and tried his hardest to keep it there.

Inviting both medical specialists and people living with HIV, Waxman provided a much needed stage which addressed AIDS in the U.S. Waxman did not shy away from AIDS, or the 'gay disease,' but instead heavily criticized both the media and the political stance on the disease and gay rights. To Waxman, it was clear that AIDS was not receiving the attention it so desperately needed. The association with homosexuality primarily resulted in this response. Consequently, Waxman discussed homosexuality in Congress and responded to the proclaimed silence from politicians and the White House. Gay activists felt that politics did not discuss homosexuality, and when AIDS arrived in the U.S. they decided to ignore the national health crisis.

Due to the persistence of Waxman, the way was paved for a growing acceptance for homosexual life and people living with HIV and AIDS. The Ryan White CARE Act, may be seen as the result of a struggle that lasted almost ten years. In 1990, at a time when over 100,000 people had died of complications of AIDS, assistance for hundreds of thousands of low-income and uninsured people with HIV and AIDS was made possible (Green).

# Conclusion

A look at the historiographical debate on AIDS in the U.S indicates that Waxman is a somewhat overlooked figure. A few notes in literature works such as, *AIDS in the Mind of America* (D. Altman), *The Epidemic: a global history of AIDS* (Engel), *And the Band Played On* (Shilts), are insufficient in explaining Waxman's role. The emphasis within these works remains with the image of AIDS as a 'gay plague,' and a disease that barely got any attention from the government.

Several recent articles indicate that Waxman was a very important figure in U.S. politics and the debate on AIDS in the 1980s. These articles were written in response to Waxman's retirement in 2014. *The Atlantic* remembers Waxman as a "congressional crusader on health issues and climate change" (Graham). *The New York Times*, describes Waxman as "a diminutive Democratic giant whose 40 years in the House produced some of the most important legislation of the era" (J. Weissman). Mother Jones, an independent news magazine publishes an article, after the announcement of his retirement, titled: "Why Henry Waxman was the most important congressman ever." In this article Waxman is praised for his political work and described as a "progressive crusader for decades" (Corn). These articles emphasize the importance of Henry Waxman in Congress. The news that Waxman was going to retire seemed to have generated more media attention. Most of these articles are about Waxman's entire political career. In this thesis, a more extensive perspective is added which focuses on one particular aspect of his career.

Henry Waxman can be seen as the dialogue between the two perspectives on the response to AIDS in the U.S. As a politician, Waxman differed from those who attacked homosexuality, or ignored the health crisis that AIDS was. Instead, Waxman organized the first congressional hearing and worked hard to place AIDS on top of the political agenda. The feeling of solitude that was present within the gay community can also be counteracted in relation to Henry Waxman. Instead of ignoring their plea for help, Waxman provided a platform for gay activists to speak out. By inviting homosexual men living with AIDS to speak about the disease in Congress, Waxman de-isolated the gay community and brought attention to the position of homosexuals in U.S. society. In this way, Henry Waxman altered both perspectives on the response to AIDS.

Geraldo Rivera, reporter for *ABC*, pointed out that Waxman was different from other politicians in handling the AIDS epidemic. Waxman "has been very critical of the government's handling of the epidemic" (Hearing August 1-2, 1983, 81). Waxman would not have the majority in Congress decide the course in battling the epidemic. In criticizing the federal health structure and the inability to properly respond to AIDS, Waxman exposed the problematic response by the federal government. Waxman did not shy away from blaming the budget committee for a lack of funding, which hindered AIDS research and treatment. These examples explain that Waxman not only tried to

address AIDS, he also pressed for federal changes which made a swift response in cause of an epidemic more efficient.

It may be argued that Waxman and his subcommittee tried to handle the epidemic in the way the federal government was supposed to. Stan Matek, President of the American Public Health, emphasized this. "We cannot look to this administration for such leadership. We cannot look to a President whose economic priorities would leave us with less coping capacity, rather than more. We have to look, Mr. Waxman, to your committee" (Hearing April, 13 1982 46). Matek's comment indicates that the Reagan administration had not properly responded to the epidemic, but it also shows that Waxman as chairman had the power to take action when the administration did not.

According to Professors of Medicine Ron and Rogers, "AIDS was viewed as a gay story that did not deserve general attention" (Ron 44). During the initial year after the fist reports of AIDS, when the term 'gay plague' was commonly used, the disease received relatively little attention from the mainstream media, the public, or politicians." (Curran). Henry Waxman cannot be included in this group. With his congressional hearings on AIDS, Waxman made it clear how problematic this perspective was.

> "There is no doubt in my mind that if the same disease had appeared among Americans of Norwegian descent, or among tennis players rather than among gay males, the response of both the government and the medical community would have been different" (Hearing August 1-2, 1983, 40).

Waxman argues that the response to AIDS was determined by its victims, gay men. By repeatedly pressing for the need to let go of this image both in Congress and outside of it, Waxman tried to alter the view of AIDS as a 'gay disease.' He addressed the problematic response to AIDS in the media during an *ABC News* item broadcasted on May, 19, 1983. In it, Waxman claimed that "the public awareness" was lacking because AIDS afflicted gay men. "Had this disease afflicted children or members of the Chamber of Commerce, I'm sure the Reagan administration would have been breaking down all doors in order to push the government on all fronts to deal with it" (Hearing August 1-2, 1983, 81). Both of these statements show how Waxman addressed the stigmatization of homosexuals in the U.S.

The stigmatization of homosexuals resulted in a feeling of solitude within the gay community. The idea that gay activists were fighting a solitary struggle is most prominently represented by Larry Kramer. When Kramer published his article "1,112 and counting" he blamed the governmental response for the increasing number of AIDS victims (Kramer). Surprising about this article is that Henry Waxman had already started addressing this issue a year before Kramer's article. On April, 13, 1982, the subcommittee on Health and Environment included a statement by Henry Waxman that read:

> "I intend to fight any effort by anyone at any level to make public health policy regarding Kaposi's Sarcoma or any other disease on the basis of his or her personal prejudices regarding other people's sexual preferences of lifestyles" (Hearing April 13, 1982, 2).

Waxman addressed the necessity to treat AIDS as a non-gay disease that deserved attention at an early stage of the epidemic. While it must be noted that gays could have experienced this otherwise, Waxman and his subcommittee tried their hardest to help them. As Chairman, Waxman invited Bobbi Campbell to speak about AIDS. To invite an openly homosexual man in Congress was extraordinary. In creating a platform for gay activists to speak out, Waxman gave AIDS a face, and at the same time opened up the debate on the acceptability of homosexuality in the U.S. By holding oversight hearings, Waxman organized the political agenda of his committee. "Congressional hearings were a golden opportunity to bring public attention to an issue, which instantly made it a higher priority for Congress'' (Waxman 45). Waxman used these hearings to make AIDS a higher priority for Congress. Besides attending hearings as chairman, Waxman also attended other hearings as a representative. In this way, Waxman not only held hearings on AIDS, but also attended hearings that discussed the topic, and participated in the debate.

Waxman's continued effort in addressing AIDS is remarkable. Providing the first congressional response, Waxman made sure AIDS remained on the political agenda. In 1990, ten years after AIDS arrived in the U.S. a piece of legislation, designed in particular for people living with HIV and AIDS, was signed. Henry Waxman provided the original outline for the House version of the Ryan White CARE Act (Siplon, 796). The CARE Act now "provides assistance for hundreds of thousands of low-income and uninsured people with HIV and AIDS" (Green). The CARE Act explains how Waxman was persistent bring attention to HIV and AIDS. In doings so, Waxman was determined to improve the living conditions and the acceptance of people, primarily gay men, living with the disease.

Henry Waxman as chairman raised awareness on AIDS and created a platform for gay activists. With his congressional hearings, Waxman made an effort to break the silence on AIDS and homosexuality in Congress. In doing so, Waxman challenged the denial of politicians who refused to see AIDS as the national health crisis it was. This denial was challenged when Waxman criticized the federal response to AIDS. Waxman claimed that AIDS was made a number one priority, however, in reality requests by the NIH and CDC for more funding were dismissed. The Reagan administration had made no real effort to fund AIDS research and treatment, therefore, Waxman's subcommittee proved crucial in changing the administration's mind (Hearing April, 13 1982 46). When the administration did not respond to the AIDS epidemic in a proper manner, Waxman as chairman took action. Together with his work to alter the image on AIDS and homosexuality within Congress and society, Waxman remains a crucial politician in the debate on AIDS in the U.S.

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