

■ Speech on AIDS at the 1992 Democratic Convention

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Author: Bob Hattoy

Genre: speech

Summary Overview

The AIDS epidemic refers to the widespread outbreak of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), caused by the HIV virus. It emerged in the early 1980s and later became a major global health issue, leading to millions of infections and deaths worldwide. The epidemic highlighted the need for better prevention, treatment, and awareness efforts. It became associated with liberal causes primarily because early responses to HIV/AIDS highlighted issues like discrimination, stigma, and the need for increased healthcare access.

In the summer of 1992, the Democratic National Convention was held at Madison Square Garden in New York City. The event was, of course, a major focal point during the 1992 presidential election, and all eyes were on the event. A series of prominent speakers, such as Jimmy Carter and Reverend Jesse Jackson, were scheduled to deliver speeches intended to excite the base of the Democratic Party and promote the Democratic candidate, and soon-to-be U.S. president, Bill Clinton. However, a lesser-known speaker by the name of Bob Hattoy delivered a deeply personal, highly emotional speech regarding the AIDS epidemic that would garner a significant amount of attention, help to boost the Clinton campaign in the polls, and firmly put AIDS in the political spotlight in a way that it had not been before.

Defining Moment

In 1981, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) began reporting about the AIDS epidemic in the United States. It was evident that there was a disease running rampant through the nation that was responsible for claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands of men and women. Congress immediately began dedicating funding for research; and organizations such as the World Health Organization, the National Institutes of Health, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration began aggressively dealing with what would come to be known as a global pandemic. Regardless of the clear severity of this issue and its direct threat to the health and well-being of American citizens, President Ronald Reagan during his tenure (1981-88), and President George H.W. Bush during his (1989-93), were both remarkably quiet on the issue and history has not come to know them for taking meaningful action in regards to AIDS. Reagan made public remarks on the epidemic but took no clear action associated with attempting to eradicate the problem, and Bush failed to act in any way to address this problem either

through words or actions. AIDS, presumably because of its association with the gay community, traditionally known to be an oppressed and stigmatized population in society, was simply not a topic being addressed on a presidential level, particularly among Republicans. The picture would begin to change, however, during the 1992 presidential elections, when Bill Clinton and a series of other speakers chose to thrust AIDS into the political spotlight.

During the 1992 Democratic Convention, two speakers were slated to address the audience with the intention of highlighting the AIDS crisis. Bob Hattoy was one of them, and his willingness to disclose extremely personal information about his life as a gay man living with AIDS forced people to listen and pay attention to a problem that no one could deny any longer. His speech was an emotionally charged, honest account of the lack of attention given AIDS under President Bush, despite the condition being the number one cause of death for American men aged 25-44 at the time. The message shared by Hattoy at the convention helped Bill Clinton to surge ahead in the polls

and, more important, can be directly linked to the increased attention given to the disease by the White House.

Author Biography

Bob Hattoy was a gay rights and environmental activist who served in the White House during the Clinton Administration. As a young man, he attended college off and on but did not complete the requirements necessary to receive a degree. He worked at various jobs ranging from Disneyland employee to staffer for a Los Angeles city councilman. At the age of 28, Hattoy

found a position he felt passionately about at the Sierra Club, where he fought adamantly for environmental justice. From there, he served as the environmental advisor for Bill Clinton's first presidential bid for office, and upon Clinton's win went on to work as associate director of personnel, as liaison to the Interior Department, and as a member of the President's Commission on HIV/AIDS. He ultimately went on to become the president of the California Fish and Game Commission, where he served until his death, from AIDS-related complications, in March 2007.



Historical Document

Speech at the 1992 Democratic Convention

Thank you. I love you. Thank you, California. Thank you, Gay and Lesbian community. Thank you, Congresswoman Pat Schroeder. Thank you, Aretha Franklin, God.

I am here tonight because of one man's courage and conviction, one man's dedication and daring and yes, one man's true kindness. He's my boss, Bill Clinton. (Applause)

You see, I have AIDS. I could be an African American woman, a Latino man, a 10-year old boy or girl. AIDS has many faces. And AIDS knows no class or gender, race or religion, or sexual orientation. AIDS does not discriminate, but George Bush's White House does. (Applause)

AIDS is a disease of the Reagan-Bush years. The first case was detected in 1981, but it took 40,000 deaths and seven years for Ronald Reagan to say the word "AIDS." It's five years later, 70,000 more dead and George Bush doesn't talk about AIDS, much less do anything about it.

Eight years from now there will be 2 million cases in America. If George Bush wins, we're all at risk in America. It's that simple. It's that serious. It's that terrible. (Applause)

(Chants of "No second term!")

This is hard. I'm a Gay man with AIDS and if there's any honor in having this disease it's because it's an honor being part of the Gay and Lesbian community in America. (Applause)

We have watched our friends and lovers die, but we have not given up hope. Gay men and Lesbians created community health clinics, provided educational materials, opened food kitchens, and held the hands of the dying in hospices. The Gay and Lesbian community is an American family in the best sense of the word. (Applause)

President Bush, we are a million points of light; you are just too morally blind to see us. Mr. President, you don't see AIDS for what it is—it's a crisis in public health that demands medical experts, not moral judges—and it's time to move beyond your politics of denial, division and death. It's time to move George Bush out of the White House. (Applause)

We need a President who will take action, a President strong enough to take on the insurance companies that drop people with the HIV virus, a President courageous enough to take on the drug companies who drive AIDS patients into poverty and deny them lifesaving medicine. And we need a President who isn't terrified of the word "condom." (Applause)

Every single person with AIDS is someone worthy of caring for. After all, we are your sons and daughters, fathers and mothers. We are doctors and lawyers, folks in the military, ministers and priests and rabbis. We are Democrats, and yes, Mr. President, Republicans. We are part of the American family and, Mr. President, your family has AIDS and we're dying and you're doing nothing about it. (Applause)

Listen. I don't want to die. I don't want to die. But I don't want to live in an America where the President sees me as the enemy. I can face dying because of a disease, but not because of politics.

So I stand here tonight in support of Bill Clinton, a man who sees the value in each and every member of the American family. And although I am a person with AIDS, I am a person with hope, because I know how different my life and all our lives could be if I could call my boss Mr. President.

Martin Luther King once said that our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter. Fifty thousand people took to the streets in New York today because they will no longer be silent about AIDS. (Applause)

Their actions give me hope. All of you came here tonight; millions more are watching in America. Obviously, we have hope and hope gives me the chance of life. I think it's really important to understand that this year, more than any other year, we must vote as if our life depends on it. Mine does; your could—and we all have so much to live for. Thank you.

(Standing ovation)

Act Up. Fight Back. Fight AIDS. Thank you.



Glossary

AIDS: acquired immune deficiency syndrome, a disease in which there is a severe loss of the body's cellular immunity, greatly lowering the resistance to infection and malignancy

Document Analysis

Even though the traditional purpose of a speech at a national convention is to promote the individual seeking the party's nomination, along with the political platform associated with him or her, Hattoy's speech dwells only briefly on Bill Clinton. He opens by touching on some of Clinton's personal character traits, such as his kindness, but the speech focuses more on an issue that would prove to be deeply personal for Hattoy. The speaker discloses, without forced emotion or sophisticated political rhetoric, that he is a gay man living with AIDS. In that moment he sets the tone for the entire speech. This was not a speech generated by political masterminds to manipulate voters; rather, it represents a man directly addressing a crisis and calling out politicians who have failed to appropriately acknowledge the severity of that crisis; and it comes from someone who has been directly, and ultimately gravely, impacted by the disease.

Hattoy cites Ronald Reagan as guilty, in no uncertain terms, of ignoring the epidemic and calls out George Bush, too, as a president who has failed to commit to AIDS research. Furthermore, Hattoy paints a picture of Bush as a man who has acted in a discriminatory fashion toward a population he does not morally agree with. According to Hattoy, Bush allowed his own personal, conservative moral judgments to permit insurance and drug companies to exploit those suffering from AIDS, and was never willing to implement important sex-education lessons (such as condom usage) because of his personal moral viewpoints. Hattoy makes sure to emphasize the fact that neither of the two Republican presidents had done anything about a disease known to kill at alarming rates; the speech, however, was focused more intently on the sitting president, Bush, and his lack of action and his motivations for not acting.

Throughout the speech, Hattoy makes clear that if President Bush were to win the election, those with AIDS and those who are likely to contract the disease are doomed. Bush is portrayed as the enemy of people living with AIDS, while Clinton is positioned as supportive of them and the true face of hope for tackling the disease in the future. In citing Martin Luther King

Jr., Hattoy calls on the American public to make their voice heard and express their disgust with the lack of attention to the AIDS crisis. As post-convention polling numbers showed, as did final election results, that message was heard loud and clear. And while the overall theme of the speech had been meant to reflect the potential for hope under a Clinton Administration, the attack on George Bush and his gross negligence regarding the epidemic could not be underestimated.

Essential Themes

After the convention some were critical of Hattoy's speech, claiming that because he was affiliated with the Clinton campaign and had resources that most of those suffering from AIDS did not have, such as money and health insurance, he was not a true representative of people with the disease. Most people in America with AIDS at that time were lower-income individuals with less access to proper health care, and some questioned whether a well-off man should be responsible for voicing the concerns of a population he did not accurately reflect. Regardless of those criticisms, and whether or not those claims were relevant, there was no denying the impact that the speech had on the American public. After the convention, Clinton saw a jump in his poll numbers, indicating that he had an approval rating of 51 percent, whereas Bush's approval rating came in at just 36 percent.

The economy had been the dominant focus during the election prior to the convention, but the speeches delivered at the convention brought attention to AIDS in a way that was unprecedented during a presidential election cycle. There was no denying that President Bush had done nothing to deal with the epidemic, and that message seemed to be resonating with voters. There is no way to accurately claim the focus on AIDS is solely responsible for getting Bill Clinton into the White House, but it is surely true that the attention brought to this serious matter was a contributing factor in the overall success of the campaign.

Once Clinton took office, he began to address AIDS in a way that previous administrations had

never done. He established a White House Office of National AIDS Policy, created the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS, and declared AIDS a threat to national security. President Clinton, understanding AIDS was truly a global crisis, began offering funding and access to generic HIV/AIDS medication to developing countries then being ravaged by the devastating disease. In short, Clinton acknowledged the severity of the issue and took action in a way no president before him had.

By 1996 AIDS was no longer a leading cause of death among Americans; however, it did and does still disproportionately effect members of the African American community. Today, the Centers for Disease Control estimates that around 40 percent of people infected with HIV do not know they are infected, and left untreated those individuals could develop full-blown AIDS. In recent years, the statistics related to AIDS have certainly improved through legislative action and initiatives launched by a variety of health organizations, and there are more effective, affordable treatments for all with this disease available. There is much more work to be done toward eradicating the disease outright, but thanks to the work that began

under the Clinton administration AIDS and similar epidemics are no longer subjects that those sitting in the White House can ignore.

—Amber R. Dickinson, PhD

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