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The Reagan administration's unbelievable response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic

By German Lopez | @germanrlopez | german.lopez@vox.com | Updated Dec 1, 2016, 11:20am EST

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When the HIV/AIDS epidemic began in the 1980s, the Reagan administration's first reaction was chilling: It appeared to treat the epidemic as a joke.

In a new documentary short by Scott Calonico called *When AIDS Was Funny*, posted by **Vanity Fair**, audio of press conferences reveals Ronald Reagan's press secretary, Larry Speakes, and members of the media joking about the HIV/AIDS epidemic — which they called "gay plague" — and laughing about one of the reporters potentially having it.

Here's the first exchange between Speakes and journalist Lester Kinsolving from 1982, when nearly 1,000 people had died from AIDS:

Lester Kinsolving: Does the president have any reaction to the announcement by the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta that AIDS is now an epidemic in over 600 cases?

Larry Speakes: AIDS? I haven't got anything on it.

Lester Kinsolving: Over a third of them have died. It's known as "gay plague." [Press pool laughter.] No, it is. It's a pretty serious thing. One in every three people that get this have died. And I wonder if the president was aware of this.

Larry Speakes: I don't have it. [Press pool laughter.] Do you?

Lester Kinsolving: You don't have it? Well, I'm relieved to hear that, Larry! [Press pool laughter.]

Larry Speakes: Do you?

Lester Kinsolving: No, I don't.

Larry Speakes: You didn't answer my question. How do you know? [Press pool laughter.]

Lester Kinsolving: Does the president — in other words, the White House — look on this as a great joke?

Larry Speakes: No, I don't know anything about it, Lester.

Later exchanges include more joking and apathy about AIDS, including from members of the press, even after more was known about the seriousness of the epidemic. Here is audio from 1984, when more than 4,200 had died:

Larry Speakes: Lester is beginning to circle now. He's moving up front. Go ahead.

Lester Kinsolving: Since the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta report is going to... [Press pool laughter.]

Larry Speakes: This is going to be an AIDS question.

Lester Kinsolving: ...that an estimated...

Larry Speakes: You were close.

Lester Kinsolving: Can I ask the question, Larry? That an estimated 300,000 people have been exposed to AIDS, which can be transmitted through saliva. [This is false; HIV can only be transmitted through blood, semen, pre-cum, rectal fluids, vaginal fluids, and breast milk.] Will the president, as commander in chief, take steps to protect armed forces, food, and medical services from AIDS patients or those who run the risk of spreading AIDS in the same manner that they bed typhoid fever people from being involved in the health or food services? [Through this question, laughter can be heard coming from the press pool.]

Larry Speakes: I don't know.

Lester Kinsolving: Is the president concerned about this subject, Larry?

Larry Speakes: I haven't heard him express concern.

Lester Kinsolving: That seems to have evoked such jocular reaction here. [Press pool laughter.]

Unidentified person: It isn't only the jocks, Lester.

Unidentified person: Has he sworn off water faucets now?

Lester Kinsolving: No, but I mean, is he going to do anything, Larry?

Larry Speakes: Lester, I have not heard him express anything. Sorry.

Lester Kinsolving: You mean he has expressed no opinion about this epidemic?

Larry Speakes: No, but I must confess I haven't asked him about it.

Lester Kinsolving: Will you ask him, Larry?

Larry Speakes: Have you been checked? [Press pool laughter.]

Unidentified person: Is the president going to ban mouth-to-mouth kissing?

Lester Kinsolving: What? Pardon? I didn't hear your answer.

Larry Speakes: [Laughs.] Ah, it's hard work. I don't get paid enough. Um. Is there anything else we need to do here?

The exchanges are hugely revealing. For one, they show just how little was known about the disease when the epidemic first broke — people thought it was exclusive to gay people, and thought that it could be transmitted through saliva, even though HIV can only be transmitted through blood, semen, pre-cum, rectal fluids, vaginal fluids, and breast milk.

The exchanges also demonstrated that Reagan and his administration didn't take the epidemic very seriously, for which the Reagan administration is still **heavily criticized**. His successors **eventually acted, albeit often very slowly, on the crisis** — leading to much more research, programs like the **Ryan White CARE Act** that connect people to care, and the development of antiretroviral medication that **increases the life expectancy** of a person living with HIV by decades.

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