

# Views: A Letter on the Death of Ronald Reagan

**Editor's Note:** Matt Foreman wrote this letter on June 6, the day former President Ronald Reagan died. Steven Powsner was Matt's best friend until he died on November 20, 1995, of complications from AIDS at age 40. Powsner had been President of the New York City Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center from 1992-1994.

**matt  
foreman**

Dear Steven;  
I so much wish you were here today to tell me what to do. You would know if it's right to comment on the death of former President Reagan, or if I should just let pass the endless paeans to his greatness. But you're not here. The policies of the Reagan administration saw to that.

Yes, Steven, I do feel for the family and friends of the former President. The death of a loved one is always a profoundly sad occasion, and Mr. Reagan was loved by many. I have tremendous empathy and respect for Mrs. Reagan, who lovingly cared for him through excruciating years of Alzheimer's.

Sorry, Steven, but even on this day I'm not able to set aside the shaking anger I feel over Reagan's non-response to the AIDS epidemic or for the continuing anti-gay legacy of his administration. Is it personal? Of course. AIDS was first reported in 1981, but President Reagan could not bring himself to address the plague until March 31, 1987, at which time there were 60,000 reported cases of full-blown AIDS and 30,000 deaths. I remember that day, Steven – you were staying round-the-clock in Memorial Sloan Kettering Hospital caring for your dying partner of over 15 years, Bruce Cooper. It was another 41 days of utter agony for both of you

before Bruce died. During those years of White House silence and inaction, how many other dear friends did we see sicken and die hideous deaths?

Is it personal? Yes, Steven. I know for a fact that you would be alive today if the Reagan administration had mounted even a tepid response to the epidemic. If protease inhibitors been available in July of 1995 instead of December, you'd still be here.

I wouldn't feel so angry if the Reagan administration's failing was due to ignorance or bureaucratic ineptitude. No, Steven, we knew then it was deliberate. The government's response was dictated by the grip of evangelical Christian conservatives who saw gay people as sinners and AIDS as God's well-deserved punishment. Remember? The White House Director of Communications, Patrick Buchanan, once argued in print that AIDS is nature's revenge on gay men. Reagan's Secretary of Education, William Bennett, and his domestic policy adviser, Gary Bauer, made sure that science (and basic tenets of Christianity, for that matter) never got in the way of politics or what they saw as "God's" work.

Even so, I think I could let go of this anger if this was just

another overwhelmingly sad chapter in our nation's past. It is not, Steven, can you believe that the unholy pact President Reagan and the Republican Party entered into with the forces of religious intolerance has not weakened, but grown exponentially stronger? Can you believe that the U.S. government is still bowing to right-wing extremists and fighting condom distribution and explicit HIV education, even while AIDS is killing millions across the world? Or that "devout" Christians have forced the scrapping of AIDS prevention programs targeted at HIV-negative gay and bisexual men in favor of bullshit "abstinence only until marriage" initiatives? Or the shameless duplicity of these same forces seeking to forever outlaw even the hope of marriage for gay people? Or that Reagan stalwarts like Buchanan, Bennett, and Bauer are still grinding their homophobic axes?

No, Steven, I do not presume to judge Ronald Reagan's soul or heart. He may very well have been a nice guy. In fact, I don't think that Reagan hated gay people – I'm sure some of his and Nancy's best friends were gay. But I do know that the Reagan administration's policies on AIDS and anything gay-related resulted – and continue to result – in despair and death.

Oh, Steven, how much I wish so much you were here. ▼

*Matt Foreman is the executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.*

## Constitution

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what defines the 'sanctity' of marriage.

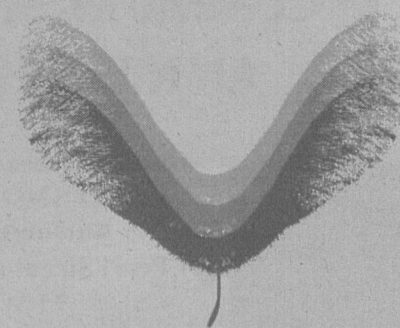
The core issue with gay-marriage is our instinct to go against those who are different from us. Years of conditioning and behavior-altering have helped us stop for the most part discriminating because

skin color, theological beliefs, and sex. However we still have the urge to push a group of people away from us – it is arguably an instinct we cannot easily abandon. However if this 28th amendment is passed, it will be the steppingstone for returning us to the time when the majority controls everything, and all others are second-class citizens.

Please remember this, we are all part of a majority, and that

majority is the human race. It doesn't matter what color, religion, intelligence, sex, or anything else; we are all human. ▼

*Taylor Poro is a Junior at South Burlington High School, straight, and sees no reason why someone should be discriminated against because of something as personal and irrelevant as sexual orientation.*



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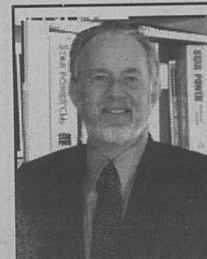
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