AND THE BAND PLAYED ON

POLITICS, PEOPLE,
AND THE AIDS EPIDEMIC
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

RANDY SHILTS

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SAN FRANCISCO CITY HALL

In the beginning, there were two major figures in San Francisco gay politics, Jim Foster and Harvey Milk. Jim Foster had worked since 1964 to lay the foundations of gay political power. His most lasting achievement was the founding of the Alice B. Toklas Memorial Democratic Club in 1972, the year that Harvey Milk moved to San Francisco. Within months of his migration, Harvey Milk decided there needed to be a gay member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors instead of the polite liberal heterosexuals whom the Toklas Club preferred. The Toklas Club leaders worried about pushing too hard—that if they were overweening, gays might lose everything they had won. Harvey Milk considered this obsequious and ignored homosexuals hadn’t won that much if they couldn’t even stake claim to their own elected officials.

When Harvey Milk asked Jim Foster for his support in his 1973 campaign for supervisor, however, Foster was agast. Who was this Johnny-come-lately to run for supervisor? he wondered. “We’re like the Catholic Church,” Foster told Milk. “We take converts, but we don’t make them pope on the same day.”

That comment made Harvey Milk hate Jim Foster, more for the personal rebuff than for the loftier philosophical differences. The Toklas Club never endorsed Harvey Milk for anything. By 1976, Milk had organized his own club, the San Francisco Gay Democratic Club, based on his own style of pragmatic power politics. The club’s slant grew with Milk’s election in 1977 and renamed itself the Harvey Milk Gay Democratic Club days after its mentor’s assassination in November 1978. Five years later, both Harvey Milk and Jim Foster were absent from the political scene, the latter nursing a lover stricken with AIDS. Nevertheless, their feud lingered and defined San Francisco gay politics. The Toklas and Milk clubs still hated each other passionately, with the Toklas faction probably fostering the bigger resentment because it had been eclipsed by the Milk Club in recent years.

Tonight all that was changing. Reporters, pundits, and various political hangers-on listened in astonishment as the registrar of voters methodically announced the returns from the recall vote on Mayor Dianne Feinstein. Not only had San Francisco’s first female chief executive won, she had seized the election with a majority rarely observed in democracies west of the Soviet Union, tallying 81 percent of the vote in her favor. Her weakest precincts were, predictably, in the Castro area where she won only 58 percent of the vote.

Rather than being an indictment of Feinstein’s four-year-old administration, the recall vote had proved to be a major triumph. Already, her critics were finding that no credible politician would oppose her reelection in the fall. Her only announced opponent was a disciple of some political wacko named Lyndon LaRouche who talked about “curing” homosexuals. Moreover, just days before, Feinstein had secured the biggest plum of her mayoral career when the Democratic Party announced that it would hold its 1984 national convention in San Francisco. This raised the hackles of conservative Democrats, who feared that a party meeting by the Golden Gate would hopelessly identify the party with fringe faggotry, but the Democratic national chairman was a Californian who preferred the Mediterranean city for sentimental reasons. Already there was speculation that Feinstein might be chosen as the Democratic vice-presidential candidate in 1984.

Most of this would be a mere embellishment to our tale except that the recall election set in motion an unfortunate political mechanism that would have a profound effect on the city’s battle against an encroaching viral invader. The battle lines drawn between recall opponents and supporters in the gay community roughly paralleled the divisions among gay leaders on how to handle the AIDS epidemic. On one side were Bill Kraus and the Harvey Milk Gay Democratic Club, who favored an aggressive campaign to alert gays to the dangers of the disease. The biological survival of the gay community was at stake. The Harvey Milk Gay Democratic Club was one of the few major political organizations in the city to support recall, largely out of anger over the domestic partners’ ordinance. On the other side were leaders of the Alice B. Toklas Memorial Democratic Club and such groups as the Coalition for Human Rights, who favored a low-key approach to the epidemic, fearing that panic could spread to heterosexuals who might resort to such unsavory actions as mass quarantines of gays. For them, the political survival of the gay community was at stake. Toklas Club members became Feinstein’s staunchest supporters in the recall election.

Politics knows only two principles: loyalty and revenge. As of this night, these two principles dictated who would wield the most influence in municipal politics and policies. The Milk Club might curry more favor among the city’s two congressional representatives and sundry state legislators, but the Toklas Club carried the weight in matters pertaining to the city and county of San Francisco, including health policy. It was an ironic state of affairs, given the fact that Mayor Feinstein’s status as a doctor’s daughter and her own instincts always favored the more assertive stance of the Milk Club. Nevertheless, a good politician must listen to his allies, and the mayor was nothing if not an astute politician. Her allegiance to the Toklas Club would have an effect on public policy for the next crucial year. San Francisco remained the most highly politicized city west of

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What must this do to Gary to hear this? It must be horrible.

Then, after I left Gary's room, I ran into a nurse, Angelina. She confirmed the report about Larry, "And this one in here, with KS," she said to me just outside a patient's open door, "he's going to die in two or three days. He's been here two months. His face, it's horrible. Do you want to see it?"

No thanks.

"I'm afraid for Gary," she said. "Larry had the same terrible headaches just a few weeks ago."

I went into the hospital with hope. I left with a sickness in my stomach.

What lies ahead? Gary will not go through that. I know. . . . When I left the hospital, I stopped by Gary's apartment to pick up clothing and my tape recorder, which I had left there over the weekend. I ran into the man who delivers videotapes to Gary. He was there to pick up some tapes, which I got for him from the apartment.

"How's Gary?" he asked.

"Not so good," I said.

"My best friend died of AIDS in Los Angeles this morning," he told me. "He got a respiratory infection three or four days ago and his whole system just went whammo."

I feel surrounded by inevitable painful death.

Gary was awake in bed when another image appeared to him. This friend had been a writer and aspiring stand-up comedian before he died of leukemia in September. Gary was excited to see him.

"There is a passageway you have to go through," he told Gary. "I'll help you get through it. You'll like it here."

Gary asked him to come back again, and a few days later he did.

"I'm scared," Gary said.

"I told you not to worry about it," his friend said, seeming impatient at the interruption. "Now stop bothering me. I've got writing to do."

The off-year municipal elections on November 8 produced a bonanza for a gay political movement that had worked long to broaden its political base nationally. Openly gay men were elected to the city councils of both Boston and Minneapolis, while a gay art dealer became mayor in Key West. Virtually all the major Democratic presidential contenders were now on the record in favor of gay civil rights. Within days of the election, Senators Alan Cranston, John Glenn, and Ernest Hollings, who were all announced presidential hopefuls, included their names among the fifteen solons seeking Senate AIDS hearings in the fall. Mayor Dianne Feinstein rolled up the largest margins in San Francisco history to win her second full term. The city got a collective chuckle from an obscure opponent named Brian Lantz, who was the northern California field organizer for an equally obscure extremist presidential candidate named Lyndon LaRouche. Among Lantz's claims in the race was that the city should abandon pro-gay politics, because he could establish that homosexuality was a temporary condition that could be cured with proper treatment.

The disclosure in mid-November that Dr. Selma Dritz had sought a legal opinion on whether she could ban people with AIDS from the city's gay bathhouses resurrected some gay leaders' convictions that a general lock-down of the city's homosexuals was imminent. Dritz had sought the city attorney's opinion about the legality of forcing AIDS sufferers out of the baths after continuing reports that patients were routinely using the sex palaces. The stories came at a time when bathhouse patronage was soaring again. A deputy city attorney ruled that Dritz would be on shaky legal ground because scientists had yet to discover a viral agent behind the epidemic, thereby proving conclusively that AIDS was a communicable disease. Dritz leaked the story to the San Francisco Chronicle, hoping at least to warn gay men of the risk of continued attendance at bathhouses. Meanwhile, at the state health department's infectious disease headquarters in Berkeley, meetings were being organized to determine state policy on what to do about recalcitrant AIDS patients. Ultimately, state health authorities listed an array of options, beginning with community dissuasion of such behavior and ending with possible quarantine of obdurate individuals. Rhetorical denunciations from gay leaders and civil liberties lawyers followed such talk. More imaginative gay leaders insisted that the suggestions were preludes to the internment of the entire gay community. The civil rights of people who might contract the deadly syndrome from these patients was rarely considered in these arguments.

Dritz tried to keep the debate elevated to the level of policy discussion. She never publicly discussed the individual who had inspired her to explore her options in restricting bathhouse patrons.

In Vancouver, Gaetan Dugas's health was beginning to fail. He had already defied all odds by surviving over three years after his June 1980 diagnosis with Kaposi's sarcoma. As his energy faded, he confided to friends that he was growing tired of the fight.

On November 21, 1983, the Centers for Disease Control reported that 2,803 Americans had been diagnosed with Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Of these, 1,146 had died.

November 22

GENEVA, SWITZERLAND

By the time thirty-eight AIDS experts from around the world gathered at the World Health Organization headquarters in Geneva for the first meeting on the
to advise him on the epidemic, and he would address an AIDS fund-raising dinner on the eve of the conference. By late May, it became clear that this would be more than just another scientific gathering. Here, at the hub of power in the United States, the science, the politics and the people of the AIDS epidemic would come together; these days would be remembered as the prologue to the future course of AIDS in America. The week would be one of those rare times when the past, the present and future converged. And everybody seemed to understand that as they trekked to their Washington hotel rooms on that cloudy, muggy Sunday afternoon.

THAT NIGHT
GEOGETOWN

Just a few days from now would mark the sixth anniversary of the publication of Michael Gottlieb's article on the mysterious cases of Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia in five Los Angeles gay men. Six years ago, Gottlieb had been an eager young immunologist in his first months at UCLA. Now, he was co-chair of a foundation hosting a dinner at which the President and First Lady were guests of honor. On Gottlieb's arm was a famous movie star, and senators and congressmen crowded the restaurant, enjoying cocktails and hors d'oeuvres. AIDS had become so respectable, Gottlieb could scarcely believe it.

Gottlieb knew that much of the success of both the evening and the foundation was the work of his escort, actress Elizabeth Taylor. Taylor's interest in AIDS had been building before it became a fashionable Hollywood cause, back when Gottlieb was discussing his plans for a national AIDS fund-raising group with Dr. Mathilde Krim of the AIDS Medical Foundation in New York City. In the last months of his life, Gottlieb's most famous patient, Rock Hudson, had launched the American Foundation for AIDS Research, or AmFAR, with a $250,000 contribution, and Taylor agreed to become the group's national chair, giving the epidemic the star quality it had long lacked.

As Gottlieb walked with Taylor through the restaurant, many people at the dinner whispered to each other about the circumstances of Gottlieb's recent departure from UCLA. Even though Gottlieb's expertise as one of the world's leading AIDS clinicians had helped secure a $10.2 million federal grant for the institution, he remained something of a persona non grata in Westwood. Yes, he was one of the most published and celebrated researchers at UCLA, but that did little more than inspire jealousy among senior academicians who had never considered AIDS to be legitimate research. If he were truly dedicated to research, they reasoned, why was he running around with movie stars, raising money and indulging in the tainted world of politics?

Gottlieb understood, of course, that much of his colleagues' antipathy dated back to 1983, when he and Dr. Marcus Conant had gone over the heads of University of California administrators to secure an emergency legislative appropriation for AIDS research. Conant had suffered a similar academic exile at UCSF and had largely limited his recent AIDS activities to his private practice.

By early 1987, Gottlieb realized the breach of academic politics had destroyed his university career as well. In just six months, Gottlieb, who remained a mere assistant professor, was turned down for tenure three times. There was also talk that the envious academicians thwarting his tenure would also effectively blackball any move he might try to make to any other university research center.

Gottlieb couldn't help but recall a conversation he had had with Marc Conant in April 1982, after they had appeared at the first congressional hearing on AIDS to plead for more funding and more concern. At that time, the pair had thought that: once people realized how serious the threat was, they would be cast as villains for not being more strident in their warnings. Now, both Gottlieb and Conant found themselves undone, not because people believed they hadn't cared enough, but because they cared too much. A few weeks before the conference, Gottlieb left his position at UCLA and opened a private practice of immunology in Santa Monica.

The night's main event was scheduled before dinner, outside, in a huge tent that had been properly secured by Secret Service agents for President Reagan's speech. As people filtered from the restaurant to the tent, their master of ceremonies was on hand to greet them. Easily recognizable by his shock of silver hair, Dr. Mervyn Silverman, former director of the San Francisco Department of Public Health, was now the president of AmFAR. Of all the early AIDS figures who had left an ambiguous legacy, it was Silverman who had taken the most redeeming course in recent years.

After his resignation as health director, he had quickly been tapped by a number of national medical groups to articulate the public health perspective on AIDS issues. During the LaRouche AIDS initiative in California, which called for mandatory AIDS testing, his mediagenic demeanor provided anti-hysterical forces with their most reasoned spokesman. As antibody testing emerged as a potent and divisive issue around the nation in 1987, it was Silverman who patiently explained the public health point of view. In the previous days, he had worked with Reagan speech writers on early drafts of that night's presidential address. It was a long way from painful meetings with sexual liberationists who worried that the city's safe-sex warningssounded too "anti-sexual." Silverman had been a man of good intentions when AIDS policy was determined by the people of good intentions. Though he had sometimes stumbled, he was a visible reminder in these less hospitable times that the people of good intentions would ultimately do far less harm to the cause of public health than the people of bad intentions.

While Dr. Silverman greeted colleagues and chatted with movie stars at the front of the tent, Dr. Paul Volberding took a seat near the back, away from the crowd. The first heat of the summer reminded him of the epidemic's first appearance. For Volberding, that day had been July 1, 1981, his first day on the job at San Francisco General Hospital, when the man whom he was replac-