

A Special Report from the Culture and Family Institute,  
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# Anatomy of a Smear

How 'Gay' Activists, the Media and the White House Shredded Jerry Thacker

By Robert Knight

***Summary:** On January 22, 2003, President Bush nominated Jerry Thacker, a Christian man with an AIDS ministry, to the presidential AIDS panel. The following day, The Washington Post severely mischaracterized Thacker as describing AIDS as a 'gay plague.' Within a few hours, Thacker withdrew his name after being assailed by homosexual groups, liberal media and White House spokesman Ari Fleischer.*

*A Culture and Family Institute media search has found numerous references to a 'gay plague' by academics, homosexual activists and mainstream media – including the Post-owned Newsweek.*

On January 23, *The Washington Post* reported that Jerry Thacker, who, along with his wife and daughter, has the AIDS virus, was appointed to the Presidential Advisory Commission on HIV and AIDS.<sup>1</sup>

The *Post*'s Page One, above-the-fold headline read:

**“AIDS Panel Choice Wrote of a ‘Gay Plague.’”**

The lead sentence of the article by Ceci Connolly described Thacker as “a Pennsylvania marketing consultant who has characterized AIDS as the ‘gay plague....’”

A biographical section on Mr. Thacker's Web site includes this:

Before 1986, Jerry Thacker was probably a lot like you. He had a beautiful family, a good church and a rewarding ministry. He knew vaguely about the 'gay plague' known as AIDS, but it seemed a distant threat.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ceci Connolly, “AIDS Panel Choice Wrote of a ‘Gay Plague’; Views of White House Commission Nominee Draw Criticism,” *The Washington Post*, January 23, 2003, P. A-1.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thememoryhole.com/pol/thacker-about.htm>.

It didn't matter that the phrase was used historically, and was in quotes. The *Post* and other media accused Thacker of using the phrase himself, and painted it as insensitive at best and bigoted at worst.

During the early 1980s, homosexual activists, academics, journalists and medical authorities routinely used the term "gay plague" to refer to the cancers and pneumonia cases that were surfacing disproportionately among homosexual men. In 1981, the *Lancet* published a study referencing a Gay Compromise Syndrome.<sup>3</sup> In 1982, *The New York Times* ran an article referring to the cluster of diseases as Gay Related Immune Deficiency Syndrome (GRID).<sup>4</sup> The disease was later named Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).<sup>5</sup>

More recently, *Newsweek* magazine, owned by the Washington Post Company, used the same term in a retrospective article about AIDS posted on MSNBC's Web site:

"Anatomy of a Plague: An Oral History," by Daniel McGinn, begins this way:

**"June 3 – In the earliest days, it was known as the 'gay plague'—a mysterious ailment affecting gay men, mostly in New York and San Francisco."**<sup>6</sup>

The *Los Angeles Times* obituary of homosexual journalist Randy Shilts had this:

**"In 1982, Shilts began covering what then was called 'the gay plague.'"**<sup>7</sup>

### White House Joins Attack

Thacker's Web site for his Scepter Institute ([www.sceptor.org](http://www.sceptor.org)) encourages Christians to reach out to AIDS victims with compassion. It also states that homosexuality is a sin and offers hope for change through Jesus Christ and reparative therapy counseling. Mr. Thacker also backs abstinence education to stem the tide of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Rather than defend its nominee, the White House went on the defensive, joining in the attack on Mr. Thacker (see Appendix Two for full transcript). Presidential spokesman Ari

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<sup>3</sup> R.O. Brennan and D.T. Durack, "Gay Compromise syndrome," *Lancet* 2, (1981) pp. 1338-1339.

<sup>4</sup> L.K. Altman, "New Homosexual Disorder Worries Officials," *The New York Times*, May 11, 1982, cited in "The History of AIDS," 1981-1986, AVERT.org Web site. <http://www.avert.org/references.htm>. AVERT.org is a United Kingdom-based AIDS action organization.

<sup>5</sup> "Current Trends Update on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) - United States," Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, (MMWR), U.S. Centers for Disease Control, September 24, 1982, 31(37); pp.507-508 and 513-514.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel McGinn, "MSNBC: AIDS at 20: Anatomy of a Plague; an Oral History," *Newsweek* Web Exclusive, (<http://www.msnbc.com/news/581827.asp>).

<sup>7</sup> Jenifer Warren and Richard C. Paddock, "Randy Shilts, Chronicler of AIDS Epidemic, Dies at 42," *Los Angeles Times*, February 18, 1994, Page A-1.

Fleischer said of Thacker, “The views that he holds are far, far removed from what the president believes.”

“As bad as this is for Mr. Thacker, it is not just about him,” said Peter LaBarbera, senior CFI policy analyst and editor of *Culture & Family Report*. “The real message is that Christians and others who defend traditional sexual morality are branded as unfit for public service. This is a warning shot: You will stay silent about homosexual activism or even support it if you aspire to any public position. Christian leaders cannot stay silent while a lavender curtain of bigotry falls over the nation, courtesy of ‘gay’ activists, their media supporters, and pro-homosexual forces in the Republican Party.”<sup>8</sup>

Even after Thacker stepped down, the “gay plague” charge was repeated. In her January 24 article on the resignation, *Post* reporter Ceci Connolly led her article this way: “Jerry Thacker, a Christian activist who has described AIDS as the ‘gay plague,’ withdrew from the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV and AIDS yesterday amid criticism of his appointment from the White House, congressional Democrats and gay activists.”<sup>9</sup>

Later in the article, Connolly noted that Thacker had provided evidence of his use of ‘gay plague’ in “describing the historical context.”

In a January 25 letter to *The Washington Post*, Cliff Kincaid, writing on behalf of Accuracy in Media, Reed Irvine’s media watchdog group, noted:

The term “gay plague” was in quotes — not referring to something Thacker had said but to a term that had been used and popularized by others.

Someone associated with Thacker apparently deleted the reference to “gay plague” from the Web page after the *Post* started sniffing around, and changed it just to “plague.” That change was newsworthy. But the fact remains that the *Post* inaccurately reported that Thacker had written it.<sup>10</sup>

On January 28, Connolly told *Culture & Family Report* that she stood by the characterization that Thacker had used the term, and said her editors agreed with it. “I wrote it that way because that was clearly his implication on his Web site.” Asked the question: “Didn’t everyone at first call it the ‘gay plague’ in the early ‘80s?” Connolly replied, “Many of the individuals I spoke to would disagree strenuously – I repeat, strenuously – with your assertion that everyone called it the ‘gay plague.’”<sup>11</sup>

Asked whether the individuals in question consisted largely of ‘gay’ activists,” Connolly said, “It was medical professionals, commission members, Republicans and Democrats.”

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<sup>8</sup>Telephone interview with the author, January 25, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Ceci Connolly, “Choice for AIDS Panel Withdraws After Criticism,” *The Washington Post*, January 24, 2003, P. A-2.

<sup>10</sup> Cliff Kincaid, letter to Michael Getler, *The Washington Post*, January 27, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Telephone interview with author.

Asked again whether it seemed fair to write that Thacker had called AIDS a “gay plague” when he had referred to its historic labeling and had even put the term in quotes, Connolly said, “We gave some pretty detailed information about it.” And she added, “Readers are more than capable of evaluating it themselves.” She also noted that Thacker’s Web site had been cleared recently of some of the more controversial terms but that she had seen the original site. When it was suggested that her own use of the term in her article could similarly be misused later to say that she had once called it a “gay plague,” she said, “That’s a stretch. I would hope someone wouldn’t get that impression from reading my articles.”<sup>12</sup>

Other media uniformly repeated the “gay plague” smear. The Associated Press on January 23 reported Thacker’s withdrawal this way:

A Christian activist chosen by the White House for a presidential AIDS advisory panel is withdrawing his name under pressure after characterizing the disease as the “gay plague,” along with other anti-homosexual statements.<sup>13</sup>

Homosexual activists did their part by describing Thacker as “right wing” and denigrating his support for abstinence programs. “This individual is an extremist ideologue who persecutes and demeans an entire class of people impacted by this disease,” David Smith, spokesman for the Human Rights Campaign, said. “That type of person has no business advising the president of the United States on how the government should address the epidemic.”<sup>14</sup>

Smith, who debated this author (CFI Director Robert Knight) on CNN’s *Talkback Live* program on January 23 about the Thacker nomination, placed a call while awaiting the program to Carl Schmid, a Republican homosexual activist who allegedly has ties to the White House. Schmid told reporters that he opposed the Thacker nomination because of “the radical agenda he’s pushing” and especially because of Thacker’s support for “abstinence-until-marriage” education.

“This shows that homosexual activists work together, regardless of party label,” LaBarbera said. “The White House is getting some very bad advice from so-called ‘gay’ Republicans, and should realize that their main allegiance is to their sexual agenda, not the GOP.”

Democrats such as Connecticut Sen. Joseph Lieberman, who has announced his candidacy for president, joined in on the Thacker-bashing. In a January 23 press release, Lieberman said, “I welcome” Thacker’s withdrawal:

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Associated Press, “Conservative withdraws from White House AIDS panel,” *The (San Jose) Mercury News*, January 23, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Ceci Connolly, “AIDS Panel Choice Wrote of a ‘Gay Plague,’” *The Washington Post*, op. cit.

His appointment would have had a divisive effect that would have threatened the critical work of this commission. His stated view that AIDS is a ‘gay plague’ is both offensive and wrong.<sup>15</sup>

Since it is clear (see Appendix One) that use of the term ‘gay plague’ was so widespread that it couldn’t disqualify Mr. Thacker from service, one can only conclude that it is Mr. Thacker’s traditional Christian views about homosexuality that are at issue. Mr. Thacker believes that homosexuality is a sin, and a dangerous one at that. The media misreported that he had called homosexuality a “deathstyle.” (That phrase was written by someone reporting on Mr. Thacker on the Web site at Bob Jones University.) In any case, medical journals chronicle that American homosexual men typically suffer from numerous sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS.<sup>16</sup>

Mr. Thacker believes people can overcome homosexual desires by receiving Jesus Christ and getting counseling. He believes, like the president, that abstinence education is the best approach to curbing AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, as has been demonstrated in Uganda.<sup>17</sup>

**Summary:** Jerry Thacker, a decent man and a strong nominee to the presidential AIDS panel, fell victim to the liberal Washington smear machine, which ignored the context and the truth of his remarks. The only solution for this situation is for the president to nominate another person with similar credentials, and then stand by the nominee.

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## APPENDIX ONE: More Examples of the Use of the ‘Gay Plague’

Unlike Mr. Thacker, none of the people or publications below that used the term has been accused of bigotry or poor judgment. Here is a small sample:

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<sup>15</sup>“Lieberman Welcomes Nominee’s Withdrawal From HIV/AIDS Panel: Says offensive views would have been divisive, threatened commission’s work,” press office, Sen. Joseph Lieberman, January 23, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> *San Francisco Monthly STD Report*, August 2002, San Francisco Department of Public Health, <http://www.dph.sf.ca.us/Reports/STD/STD0208.pdf>. Also, L.A. Valleroy, D.A. MacKellar, J.M. Daron, et al, “HIV Prevalence and associated risks in young men who have sex with men, *JAMA*, 2000, pp. 198-204, and J.A. Catania, D. Osmond, et al, “The Continuing HIV epidemic among men who have sex with men,” *American Journal of Public Health*, June 2001; 91 (6) pp. 907-914. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/htbin-post/Entrez/query?db=m&form=6&Dopt=r&uid=11392933>.

<sup>17</sup> “USAID Convenes Panel on Uganda,” presentations from a forum by the Synergy Project, USAID, February 5, 2002, <http://www.synergyaids.com/show.asp?id=3537&type=11>.

According to a film review of *Longtime Companion* posted on MSNBC's Web site: **"The Village Voice began a series of in-depth articles concerning a 'gay plague' which later became known as AIDS."**

**"Rumors abounded – that the virus was spread through poppers, that it was deliberate government genocide, that it was carried in swine flu; I remember thinking that the ultimate gay plague would be contracted over the phone."**

Paul Rudnick, "Now It's AIDS INC.," *TIME* magazine, (December 30, 1996/January 6, 1997), <http://www.time.com/time/special/moy/ho/perspectivetext1.html>.

**"By 1982, the outbreak has turned into an epidemic, the so-called 'gay plague.'"**

San Francisco AIDS Foundation: "Remembering Our Past As We Look to the Future," June 2001, [http://www.sfaf.org/aboutsfaf/outreach/june01/commentary\\_remembering.html](http://www.sfaf.org/aboutsfaf/outreach/june01/commentary_remembering.html).

**"The mysterious sickness was quickly labeled 'gay-related immune deficiency syndrome,' or GRID for short. Some people simply called it the 'gay plague.'"**

Alan Cantwell, Jr., M.D., "Gay Cancer, Emerging Viruses, and AIDS," University of Texas, author of *AIDS & the Doctors of Death*, and *Queer Blood* (both Los Angeles: Ariès Rising Press), [http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~wbova/fn/earth/AIDS\\_2.pdf](http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~wbova/fn/earth/AIDS_2.pdf).

**"As I write, the plague that descended on us in 1981 is still with us. A generation of young gay men has never known life without its presence."**

Ian Young, "The Stonewall Experiment: A Gay psychohistory," (UK/US: Cassell, 1995), <http://www.virusmyth.net/aids/books/iyintro.htm>.

A San Francisco nurse recalls early press coverage (from UC Berkley's Web site):

**Interviewer Sally Smith Hughes: "I'm interested in how different groups perceive what later becomes AIDS. The gay and straight press begin to talk about gay plague, gay cancer. They're focusing, I believe, on the KS [Kaposi's Sarcoma] part of the syndrome, are they not?"**

**Angie Lewis, clinical nurse, University of California, San Francisco: "Yes, pretty much. Do you know about when that was? I remember that there were certainly cover stories –"**

**Hughes: "By 1982, maybe earlier than that, the terms were in use...."**

--The AIDS Epidemic in San Francisco: The Response of the Nursing Profession 1981-1984, Vol. II,  
<http://www.sunsite.berkeley.edu:2020/dynaweb/teiproj/oh/science/aidsnur2@Gene.../3518;pt=356>.

**“1982 – Dr. James Curran of the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta headed a national task force investigating what was being called the ‘gay plague.’”**

G&L: Events 1981-1984 (San Diego State University Web site),  
[http://edwebsdsu.edu/people/cmehison/gay\\_les/ev8184.html](http://edwebsdsu.edu/people/cmehison/gay_les/ev8184.html).

**“AIDS started out as a ‘gay plague’ (’81-’84) that threatened to wipe out the entire gay community, turned into an ‘epidemic that affects us all’ (’84-’96) and finally morphed into a sometimes lethal but often manageable disease that continues to affect a small percentage of ‘risk’ groups.”**

Sky Gilbert, “AIDS dissidents must be heard,” PINK PANTHER, EyeWeb site, posted May 18, 2000, [http://www.eye.net/eye/issue/issue\\_05.18.00/columns/pink.html](http://www.eye.net/eye/issue/issue_05.18.00/columns/pink.html).

**“His cultural op-eds were carried throughout the gay media and circulated widely on the Internet, most notably a piece entitled, ‘The New Gay Plague’ on the emerging drug addiction problem in the gay community.”**

“Kevin Ivers Ends Ten Years of Service to Log Cabin Republicans,” press release, July 31, 2002. Log Cabin Republicans is a homosexual pressure group.  
<http://www.lcr.org/rightclicks/press/20020731.asp>.

**“I remember saying that this disease was very scary and adding, ‘maybe everyone’s going to get it.’ In those days, AIDS was still thought of largely as a ‘gay plague.’”**

Graham Hancock, “AIDS,” *New Internationalist* 169, March 1989,  
<http://www.newint.org/issue169/contents.htm>.

**“The AIDS epidemic has been called a *plague*, a metaphor frequently used by the media. ‘The Gay Plague’ and ‘The AIDS Plague: Is Anyone Safe?’ were both headlines used by the media.”**

Chapter Outline, The University of Hartford’s “History of Epidemics: History’s Lessons,” <http://uhavax.hartford.edu/aloisi/webpages/auct140/histor.htm>.

**“Within two decades, HIV has moved from a ‘gay plague’ in the U.S. to an epidemic, to now a worldwide pandemic with infection rates and death rates in Africa that are beyond comprehension.”**

John Siegfried, "Gay 'n Gray: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," LETTERS From CAMP Rehoboth, June 29, 2001, [http://www.camprehoboth.com/issue06\\_29\\_01/gray.html](http://www.camprehoboth.com/issue06_29_01/gray.html).

**"This dangerous denial period allowed the disease to spread further, before scientists finally learned it was not simply a 'gay plague' but a blood-borne virus."**

"History: Lessons From the Time of Cholera," News & Notes, *UC Davis Magazine*, Fall 1996, [http://www-ucdmag.ucdavis.edu/fall96/News&NotesTOC/News\\_Cholera.html](http://www-ucdmag.ucdavis.edu/fall96/News&NotesTOC/News_Cholera.html).

**"The New York Times reported the finding under the heading 'Rare cancer seen in 41 homosexuals.' The article appeared on Page 20. The 'gay plague' was born."**

"The Plague at 20: Part I," a Special Report by Andre Picard in Montreal, *The Globe and Mail*, Toronto, Canada, June 30, 2001, <http://archives.theglobeandmail.com/series/aids>.

## APPENDIX TWO: Presidential Spokesman Ari Fleischer's comments

Here is the exchange from the January 23 press conference when White House spokesman Ari Fleischer was asked about Mr. Thacker (emphasis added).

*Q: A member of the administration's AIDS Advisory Council has called AIDS "a gay plague." Does the President condone that kind of language?*

**MR. FLEISCHER: No, the President does not share that view; the President has a totally opposite view. That remark is far removed from what the President believes and for the President has – stand for. [sic] The President, in terms of what he has done for the issue of AIDS, has brought a real focus to increasing funds, both domestic and foreign policy, to help people with AIDS, the President's view is totally the opposite of that. The President's view is people with AIDS need to be treated with care, compassion, and that's why his budget has provided so much money to help in the fight against AIDS.**

*Q What qualifications did Jerry Thatcher have for the job, to be on this council, and why is he still on it?*

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, number one, he is not on it. Number two, this is – the question of who would get appointed to it is not a presidential appointment, it's an appointment that comes at the Cabinet level. And, as a point of fact, no one has been appointed to date.

*Q He is the selection of the Bush administration to date. What were his qualifications to get that Bush administration endorsement? And why is he still the administration's choice to be on that panel?*

MR. FLEISCHER: I think you – I'm not indicating to you – as you know, I don't speculate about personnel. I'm not indicating to you whether he will or will not be appointed to that panel. **What I am indicating to you is that the views that he holds are far, far removed from what the President believes.**<sup>18</sup>

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"Fleischer's comments were what you might expect from the character assassins and religious bigots of the far left, not from a spokesman for President Bush," Sandy Rios, CWA president, said in a January 24 press release.<sup>19</sup>

On January 27, WorldNetDaily reporter Les Kinsolving had this exchange with Mr. Fleischer at a press conference:

Q: Ari, the Associated Press reports that in reaction to what they termed your stern rebuke of Jerry Thacker, a group called Human Rights Campaign said that while this was a positive development, the Bush administration's "obsessive focus on abstinence as the solitary mechanism to prevent the transmission of HIV is not based on sound science."

And my question is, what is the Bush administration's response to this charge that you are obsessive and unscientific?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think from the President's point of view he has long made the case that abstinence is more than sound science, it's a sound practice, that abstinence has a proven track record of working. Now, this is part of an approach that includes, under the budget the President has submitted, other approaches as well, not just one approach or another approach.

But the President has indicated that he thinks that we need to have more of a focus in our school system on abstinence as an option for young people.

Q: The AP also reports that after you gave Thacker the stern rebuke, he withdrew his name from a presidential advisory commission. And my question is, do you include this — in this rebuke the many, many millions who voted for Bush who agree with Mr.

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<sup>18</sup> White House Web site: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030123-3.html#6>.

<sup>19</sup>"CWA's Rios Calls on Fleischer to Apologize for Bashing Christian," press release, Concerned Women for America, January 24, 2003, <http://www.cwfa.org/articledisplay.asp?id=3156&department=MEDIA&categoryid=family>.

Thacker as well as the medical profession, who originally called AIDS “GRID,” or Gay Related Immunodeficiency?

MR. FLEISCHER: Lester, I’m in no position to make any judgments about other people's connections to a statement made by Mr. Thacker. I can only give you the President's judgment about what Mr. Thacker said, and I shared that with you last week.<sup>20</sup>

*Pro-family leaders including Rios, Coral Ridge Ministries President D. James Kennedy and American Family Association President Don Wildmon called on Fleischer to apologize to Thacker.*

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030127-2.html>