

ALMEIDA THEATRE

'America, Wake up' by Elizabeth Glaser

The Speech

- Watch the speech delivered by Nicola Walker

Duration: 10 minutes

<https://www.speech.almeida.co.uk/speech/america-wake-up>

- Discuss students' initial responses.

Context

Elizabeth Glaser was an American AIDS activist and co-founder of the *Elizabeth Glaser Paediatric AIDS Foundation*.

Whilst giving birth to her first child, Glaser received an emergency blood transfusion, which unknowingly infected her with HIV, which she then passed onto her children through breast-feeding, and *in utero*.

Her daughter passed away from the disease which prompted her to become much more active in her fight against the AIDS epidemic, in order to save her herself and her son from the same fate.

This speech was delivered at the Democratic National Convention in New York on 14 July 1992.

- Research the history of the HIV and AIDS epidemic and the impact of this in a drive towards creating Universal Health in the United States.
- How has the Arts world presented the AIDS crisis? Complete a study of a film or literary text – examples available at the end of this document.

Content

- Watch the speech again.
- Assign students one of the following cards to respond to.
- Lead a group discussion drawing on the students' responses.

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<p>To what extent does the speaker draw from personal anecdote?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is the effect of this?• At which points does she present the details of her family's illness?• Is there a pattern, for example do they become increasingly moving?	<p>How does the speech overturn stereotypes about AIDS?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does Elizabeth Glaser's scenario indirectly counteract the audience's possible preconceptions of AIDS?• How does she emphasise that she is an ordinary American?• How does this speech illustrate, albeit indirectly, that AIDS is not the wrath of God against homosexuals (one of the myths that accompanied the virus' first appearance)?• Make a note of the statistics she includes.
<p>How does she speak on behalf of everyone, despite her situation being so singular?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How is her family situation representative of the majority of Americans, despite her comfortable background?• How are the kinds of struggles she faces relatable to others?• How is her appeal the voice of an ordinary woman (albeit 'well-to-do') insofar as the demands she makes?• What is ordinary about the language of the speech?	<p>How does she question the core values of a nation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How is the underpinning idea of patriotism, or her belief in America, set against the nation's shortcomings? Keep a track of the validation of America's greatness and the criticism.• Make a list of the transgressions she accuses America of making, and its shortcomings in caring for its citizens.• How does the personification of the nation contribute to this argument?

Language and Structure

- Ask students to read a copy of the speech and explore the rhetorical devices used. **A transcript of the speech is included at the end of this document.**
- This exercise encourages students to identify features of rhetorical language, and more importantly to comment on their effect.

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- Provide students with the chart below. This exercise could be done individually with each student completing the full table or by splitting the class in to groups and allocating three lines of the table to each group and asking them to feedback on one.

Language/ Structural Device	Example	Effect
Themes and Key Words		
Types of repetition - e.g. a single word or a phrase or an idea		
Rhetorical pauses, rhetorical questions, exclamations		
Ethos – a demonstration of the speaker’s credibility or strength of character		
Pathos – the emotional appeal of the speech		
Logos – appealing to the audience with reason and using facts and figures		
Anecdotes		
Pronouns and modes of addressing audience		
Register e.g. formal/informal		
Understatement		
Tone		

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Discussion

- Watch the discussion between Nicola Walker and members of the Almeida's Mothers and Daughters Community Project.

Duration: 4 minutes 44 seconds

<https://www.speech.almeida.co.uk/reaction/america-wake-up>

- Choose one of the comments raised in the discussion that you agree with and develop it in to a more detailed written argument with examples.
- Leaders who 'talk straight' are not necessarily going to bring about change for the better. **00:30**
- The promotion of American values and greatness, and the language that accompanies this ideology, have become tainted in recent times. **00:42**
- The power of the speech, in part, lies in the ability to restrain emotions and advocate simplicity. **01:27**
- The concept of the duty to care for others is infectious but unrealised. **02:19**
- The speech invites the rare response of trust. **02:49**
- The personal and human element of the speech, albeit supported by facts and statistics, is missing in politics today. **03:02**

Extension Task

- Ask students to write a speech about a contemporary problem in British society using a positive refrain or repeated word that asserts their faith in the nation.
- Encourage them to keep the tone quiet and considered.
- Advise them to make sure that the facts and details are more dramatic than the language allowing the understatement to create the impact.

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Useful Links

Websites

[Apathy plus HIV kills](#) – Los Angeles Times article by Nathalia Holt

[Healthcare in America](#) – BBC Newsbeat

[HIV and AIDS](#) – Further information from the National Aids Trust

[Raising Awareness](#) – Simple actions to raise awareness

[HIV and AIDS Prevention](#) – Information from the NHS

[Elton John AIDS Foundation](#) – Charitable foundation that supports programs which advance the fields of prevention, treatment and education

[Crisis of Care](#) – BBC Radio 3 Series

[The Reunion](#) – BBC Radio 4 Series – Episode on the Contaminated Blood Crisis in the NHS

Books

[Holding the Man](#) – a memoir by Timothy Conigrave later adapted for the stage and for film

[The Line of Beauty](#) by Alan Hollinghurst

[Tell the Wolves I'm Home](#) by Carol Rifka Brunt

Plays

[The Laramie Project](#) – by Moises Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theater Project

[Holding the Man](#) – a stage adaptation by Tommy Murphy of the memoir by Timothy Conigrave

[Angels in America](#) by Tony Kushner

[Rent](#) by Jonathan Larson

[My Night With Reg](#) by Kevin Elyot

[The Inheritance](#) by Matthew Lopez

Films

[Philadelphia](#) – starring Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington Philadelphia was one of the first mainstream Hollywood films to acknowledge HIV/AIDS, homosexuality, and homophobia.

[The Laramie Project](#) – written and directed by Moisés Kaufman and based on the play of the same name, the film tells the story of the aftermath of the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming.

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[Holding the Man](#) – a film adaptation of the memoir by Timothy Conigrave, directed by Neil Armfield.

[The Dallas Buyer's Club](#) – starring Matthew McConaughey The Dallas Buyer's Club tells the true story of a man diagnosed with AIDS who smuggled unapproved pharmaceutical drugs into Texas and distributed them to fellow people with AIDS by establishing the "Dallas Buyers Club".

[How to Survive a Plague](#) – how a coalition between ACT UP and TAG turned AIDS from a death sentence into a survivable illness.

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AMERICA, WAKE UP Elizabeth Glaser | 14 July 1992

This is an edited version of Elizabeth Glaser's speech at the 1992 National Convention of the U.S. Democratic Party.

I'm Elizabeth Glaser.

Eleven years ago, while giving birth to my first child, I haemorrhaged and was transfused with seven pints of blood. Four years later, I found out that I had been infected with the AIDS virus and had unknowingly passed it to my daughter, Ariel, through my breast milk, and my son, Jake, in utero.

Twenty years ago I wanted to be at the Democratic Convention because it was a way to participate in my country. Today, I am here because it's a matter of life and death. Exactly four years ago my daughter died of AIDS. She did not survive the Reagan Administration. I am here because my son and I may not survive four more years of leaders who say they care, but do nothing. I am in a race with the clock. This is not about being a Republican or an Independent or a Democrat. It's about the future – for each and every one of us.

I started out just a mum – fighting for the life of her child. But along the way I learned how unfair America can be today, not just for people who have HIV, but for many, many people – poor people, gay people, people of colour, children. A strange spokesperson for such a group: a well-to-do white woman. But I have learned my lesson the hard way, and I know that America has lost her path and is at risk of losing her soul. America, wake up: We are all in a struggle between life and death.

I understand the sense of frustration and despair in our country, because I know first-hand about shouting for help and getting no answer. I went to Washington to tell Presidents Reagan and Bush that much, much more had to be done for AIDS research and care, and that children couldn't be forgotten. The first time, when nothing happened, I thought, "They just didn't hear me." The second time, when nothing happened, I thought, "Maybe I didn't shout loud enough." But now I realize they don't hear because they don't want to listen.

When you cry for help and no one listens, you start to lose your hope. I began to lose faith in America. I felt my country was letting me down – and it was. This is not the America I was raised to be proud of. I was raised to believe that other's problems were my problems as well. But when I tell most people about HIV, in hopes that they will help and care, I see the look in their eyes: "It's not my problem," they're thinking. Well, it's everyone's problem and we need a leader who will tell us that. We need a visionary to guide us – to say it wasn't all right for Ryan White to be banned from school because he had AIDS, to say it wasn't alright for a man or a woman to be denied a job because they're infected with this virus. We need a leader who is truly committed to educating us.

I believe in America, but not with a leadership of selfishness and greed – where the wealthy get health care and insurance and the poor don't. Do you know how much my AIDS care costs? Over 40,000 dollars a year. Someone without insurance can't afford this. Even the drugs that I hope will keep me alive are out of reach for others. Is their life any less valuable? Of course not. This is not the America I was raised to be proud of – where rich people get care and drugs that poor people can't. We need health care for all. We need a leader who will say this and do something about it.

I believe in America, but not a leadership that talks about problems but is incapable of solving them – two HIV commission reports with recommendations about what to do to solve this crisis sitting on shelves, gathering dust. We need a leader who will not only listen to these recommendations, but implement them.

I believe in America, but not with a leadership that doesn't hold government accountable. I go to Washington to the National Institutes of Health and say, "Show me what you're doing on HIV." They hate it when I come because I try to

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tell them how to do it better. But that's why I love being a taxpayer, because it's my money and they must feel accountable.

I believe in an America where our leaders talk straight. When anyone tells President Bush that the battle against AIDS is seriously under-funded, he juggles the numbers to mislead the public into thinking we're spending twice as much as we really are. While they play games with numbers, people are dying.

I believe in America, but an America where there is a light in every home. My house has been dark for too long.

Once every generation, history brings us to an important crossroads. Sometimes in life there is that moment when it's possible to make a change for the better. This is one of those moments.

For me, this is not politics. This is a crisis of caring.

This is the future – women, men of all colours saying, "Take America back." We are just real people wanting a more hopeful life. But words and ideas are not enough. Good thoughts won't save my family. What's the point of caring if we don't do something about it? A President and a Congress that can work together so we can get out of this gridlock and move ahead, because I don't win my war if the President cares and the Congress doesn't, or if the Congress cares and the President doesn't support the ideas.

All of us can begin to deliver that partnership.

My daughter lived seven years, and in her last year, when she couldn't walk or talk, her wisdom shone through. She taught me to love, when all I wanted to do was hate. She taught me to help others, when all I wanted to do was help myself. She taught me to be brave, when all I felt was fear. My daughter and I loved each other with simplicity. America, we can do the same.

This was the country that offered hope. This was the place where dreams could come true, not just economic dreams, but dreams of freedom, justice, and equality. We all need to hope that our dreams can come true. I challenge you to make it happen, because all our lives, not just mine, depend on it.