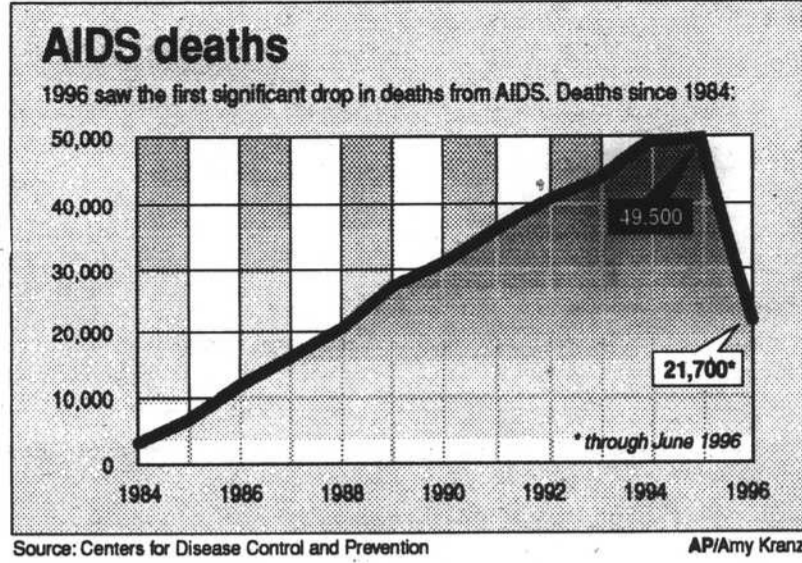


AIDS deaths dropped in 1996



ATLANTA (AP) - AIDS deaths fell 13 percent in the first half of 1996, about 62,200 people were diagnosed, the first significant drop since the epidemic began in 1981, the government said Thursday.

Officials credited better treatment and programs. "This is one of the first bright spots we have seen in this epidemic," said Christopher Portelli, executive director of the National Lesbian and Gay Health Association in Washington. "But we hope it is seen as a call to arms rather than a chance to relax and breathe a sigh of relief."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said about 22,000 people died of AIDS in the first six months of 1996, down from the 24,900 deaths in the same period a year earlier. There was more good news Thursday: While the number of people diagnosed with AIDS continues to grow,

the growth rate is slowing. In 1995, about 62,200 people were diagnosed, an increase of less than 2 percent over the 61,200 new cases in 1994.

What's still unclear is the impact of a new class of drugs called protease inhibitors. The AIDS death rate leveled off in 1995, before those medicines became widely available.

Not all doctors are sure that AIDS is making an about-face, however. "In my view, this decline is unfortunately only a lull," said Dr. Irvin S.Y. Chen, director of the AIDS Institute at UCLA. "Not all patients are responding as effectively as the majority of patients. There are some patients for whom the drugs are not effective." Portelli said, "We are concerned that people will misinterpret this news. We would hope to see more money and support for better access to medical services. New drugs are not all we need."

Army soldier found guilty in racist killings

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. (AP) - A white former paratrooper faces the death penalty after being convicted Thursday in a racial killing that set off a nationwide outcry over extremists in the military.

James N. Burmeister, 21, was found guilty of two counts of first-degree murder and conspiracy in the shootings of Jackie Burden and Michael James on Dec. 7, 1995.

Jurors were to hear more evidence Friday before recommending the death penalty or life in prison.

The victims' mothers split on whether Burmeister should be executed.

"He has the heart of cold steel and God help him," said Lillie G. James, who said she didn't wish to see Burmeister get the death penalty.

Mary Lou Burden, however, raised her arms in victory outside the courthouse and said she hoped the jury sentences her daughter's killer to death.

"I'm so happy ... I can't talk, I'm so happy," she said.

Civil rights advocates also applauded the verdict.

"Today a jury affirmed the right of people of every background, race and religion to walk the streets of America without fear," said Abraham H. Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

Burmeister showed no emotion as the guilty verdicts were read, but his mother, Kathy, sobbed in the row of seats behind him.

Prosecutors contended that Burmeister killed the couple on a dirt road near downtown Fayetteville for no other reason than to earn a spider web tattoo, a sign among racist skinheads at nearby Fort Bragg that the wearer had killed a black person.

"The animal who took the lives of these two people executed them in as coldblooded a manner as is possible," prosecutor Ed Grannis told the jury during closing arguments Tuesday.

The slaying prompted an Armywide investigation that found little evidence of extremist activity in the service.

However, the probe did turn up 22 soldiers at Fort Bragg, all white men including Burmeister and the two other soldiers charged in the killings, with ties or sympathies toward extremist groups.

The three accused soldiers were kicked out of the Army, where they had been in the elite 82nd Airborne Division.

Culture war underway in French city's library

MARIGNANE, France (AP) — The citizens of Marignane always have been proud of their town library. A "temple of culture," the town's history book calls it.

But lately, visitors to the periodicals section wanting to read Liberation, a major newspaper with a leftist attitude, have had to go across the street to the newspaper kiosk.

Marignane is National Front territory.

The leader of the far-right party, Jean-Marie Le Pen, has made headlines worldwide for his war on immigration, which he blames for high unemployment and crime.

But here in southern France, where the Front controls four city halls, people are talking about a different kind of war. A quieter one, but one many say is equally dangerous.

It is being waged in libraries, theaters and festivals, and it is creating a climate of anger, vengeance and sometimes fear.

"We have a choice: Censor ourselves, or lose our jobs," said a librarian in one of the cities, who refused to be further identified for fear of being fired.

Marignane, a town of 32,000 near Marseille, was one of three captured

"We have a choice: Censor ourselves, or lose our jobs."

a French librarian

by the Front in June 1995 municipal elections, along with Orange to the north and Toulon to the south. This month, nearby Vitrolles joined them.

A book by a National Front supporter with a preface by Le Pen was on display recently in Marignane's airy, spacious library.

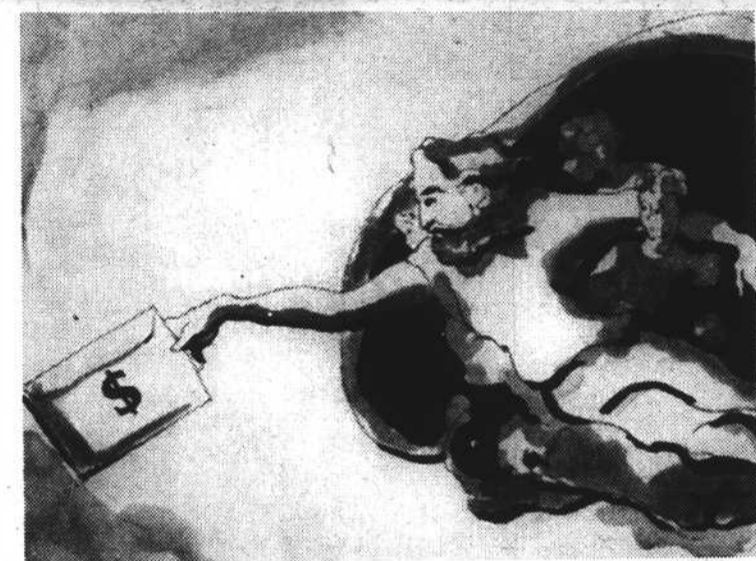
In periodicals, the plastic slot for Liberation, one of France's five most widely read papers, was empty.

"Subscription interrupted on Sept. 4, 1996," a label said. The same was written under slots for two other popular leftist publications. Three extreme-right publications had been added.

In a reader's request log, someone had asked when the newspapers would return. "That is not up to us," said the handwritten response, directing the reader to the mayor's office.

The Lighter Side...

of The Associated Press



AARON STECKELBERG/DN

God may already be a winner

TAMPA, Fla. — American Family Publishers found God in Sumter County. And He may be very, very rich.

A sweepstakes notice arrived at the Bushnell Assembly of God earlier this month announcing God, of Bushnell, Fla., was a finalist for the \$11 million top prize.

"I always thought he lived here, but I didn't actually know," said Bill Brack, pastor of the church about 60 miles north of Tampa. "Now I do. He's got a P.O. box here."

"God, we've been searching for you," American Family wrote in the letter, as first reported by the local weekly newspaper, the Sumter County Times.

If God were to win, the letter stated, "What an incredible fortune there would be for God! Could you imagine the looks you'd get from your neighbors? But don't just sit there, God."

Brack said a youth pastor collected the mail that day and pointed out the addressee. "I read it in church a couple of weeks ago and everyone got a kick out of it," he said. "It is funny and everybody seemed to enjoy it. It lifted everybody's heart."



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The Daily Nebraskan (USPS 144-080) is published by the UNL Publications Board, Nebraska Union 34, 1400 R St., Lincoln, NE 68588-0448, Monday through Friday during the academic year; weekly during summer sessions.

Readers are encouraged to submit story ideas and comments to the Daily Nebraskan by calling 472-2588. The public has access to the Publications Board.

Subscription price is \$55 for one year.

Postmaster: Send address changes to the Daily Nebraskan, Nebraska Union 34, 1400 R St., Lincoln, NE 68588-0448. Second-class postage paid at Lincoln, Neb.

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