



Andrew Sullivan appearing on the Chris Matthews Show on MSNBC in 2012.

Sullivan, Andrew (b. 1963)

by Stephanie R. Olson

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Social and political commentator Andrew Sullivan has established himself as an influential participant in Anglo-American political discourse. A senior editor of *The New Republic*, an essayist for *Time*, a columnist for the *Sunday Times* of London, the author of two books, and a pioneer blogger, the prolific Sullivan articulates a conservative-libertarian point of view, tending toward conservatism in fiscal and foreign policy and libertarianism in social issues.

Born on August 10, 1963 to a middle-class Irish Catholic family in South Godstone, England, a suburb of London, Sullivan early distinguished himself as an outstanding student. He earned an undergraduate degree at Oxford in modern history and modern languages. At Oxford, he was Chair of the university's debating society, the Oxford Union.

In 1984, Sullivan was awarded a prestigious Harkness Fellowship to study in the United States. He earned an M.A. in Public Administration and a Ph.D. in Political Science from Harvard, where he wrote his thesis on the conservative British philosopher Michael Oakeshott.

Sullivan began a free-lance writing career as an undergraduate, but became a nationally known figure when he was appointed editor-in-chief of *The New Republic* in 1991, a position he held until 1996. Not only was he the youngest editor in the history of *The New Republic*, he was also the first openly gay editor-in-chief of a major mainstream news magazine. While at *The New Republic*, Sullivan was named Editor of the Year by *Adweek*, and received National Magazine Awards for Reporting, General Excellence, and Public Interest.

Sullivan is credited (or blamed) for helping move the venerable *New Republic* in a conservative direction. Never a stranger to controversy, he made waves on the left with his critique of the Clinton healthcare plan and the publication of excerpts from *The Bell Curve*, Charles Murray's widely contested book on race and intelligence. At the same time, he stirred controversy on the right with his coverage (and support) of gay rights and his publication of articles by lesbian libertarian critic Camille Paglia.

Even Sullivan's departure from *The New Republic* in 1996 was controversial. Whether he left on his own free will or whether he was fired remains in question. He had recently revealed that he was HIV-positive (having tested positive in 1993) and may have needed to leave the stress of his job for medical reasons, or he may have lost an internal power struggle within the organization. In any case, upon his departure, he accepted the title Senior Editor.

Sullivan's 1993 essay "The Politics of Homosexuality," published in *The New Republic*, was called the most influential article on gay rights of the 1990s by *The Nation* magazine. Sullivan has written extensively on gay issues, including the critically-acclaimed books *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality* (1995) and *Love Undetectable: Notes on Friendship, Sex and Survival* (1998).

Although *Virtually Normal* is sometimes described as a conservative book, it actually follows in the mainstream of American liberalism, arguing for public tolerance of homosexuality and homosexuals. What

makes it seem conservative is that it eschews the radical left perspective that has dominated glbtq political thought. It has been contrasted especially with Urvashi Vaid's *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*, also published in 1995.

Love Undetectable is a treatise on the virtue of friendship, and combines three essays on the plague of AIDS, homosexuality, and psychotherapy. Sullivan has also edited an anthology entitled *Same Sex Marriage: Pro and Con* (1997, rev. ed. 2004).

A self-described "South Park Republican," Sullivan frequently espouses gay rights in the language of conservatism and traditional values. In a 1989 *New Republic* article in support of legalizing gay marriage, for example, Sullivan argued that the concept of domestic partnership undermines the importance of the marital bond, which he believes should be supported by the government for the social role it performs in promoting "emotional stability, economic security and the healthy rearing of the next generation." Therefore, he argues, rather than recognizing domestic partnerships we should "legalize old-style marriage for gays."

A practicing Roman Catholic, Sullivan often writes from the perspective of a Catholic moral tradition, though he has been very critical of the Church's recent homophobic pronouncements on homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and gays in the priesthood.

Although Sullivan endorsed George W. Bush in the 2000 Presidential election, he withdrew his support for him in the 2004 election, citing the administration's position on gay rights and its mishandling of the war in Iraq. He particularly criticized the Republican Party's cynical exploitation of homophobia for political gain.

In 2001, Sullivan was at the center of a sex scandal that has, to some extent, damaged his credibility as a spokesperson for conservative values. *Village Voice* columnist Michael Musto revealed that Sullivan had placed advertisements for "bareback sex" on a sexually oriented website that promoted unprotected sex. Journalist Michelangelo Signorile, who had earlier been attacked by Sullivan for his practice of outing closeted officials, accused Sullivan of rank hypocrisy for engaging in dangerous sexual activity while inveighing against homosexual promiscuity in his writings. More recently, Signorile has accused Sullivan, whom he dubs "Bareback Andy," of extolling "the virtues of having HIV and the wonders of being positive," and thereby encouraging others to practice unsafe sex.

Sullivan's latest incarnation is as a blogger. His blog, *The Daily Dish*, launched in 2000 on his website, www.andrewsullivan.com, quickly became one of the most popular political blogs on the web. He posts copies of his articles, as well as his observations on a variety of subjects, from the war in Iran to political torture to homosexuality, and engages in exchanges with readers of a wide range of viewpoints. Because of his willingness to admit mistakes and misjudgments, as well as his passionate commitment to ideals of justice, Sullivan is at his most appealing as a blogger. *The Daily Dish* justifies his assertion that "blogging is the first journalistic model that actually harnesses rather than merely exploits the true democratic nature of the web."

As a public intellectual and journalist, Sullivan is also a popular lecturer, speaking extensively on college campuses, as well as making frequent appearances on the television and radio talk show circuit. Sullivan continues to write and speak on a wide range of issues, including international affairs, religion, faith, cultural issues, and domestic politics.

In 2007, Sullivan not only accepted the editorship of the *Atlantic Monthly*, but he married his partner of three years, Aaron Tone, a health-club worker and actor. The couple were married in Provincetown, Massachusetts on August 27 in a ceremony attended largely by family members.

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About the Author

Stephanie R. Olson is a Ph.D. candidate at Rutgers University. Her research interests include race, gender, and social justice issues. Her dissertation examines the political implications of women's self-defense. She is a co-founder of the Empower Program, a violence prevention non-profit organization in Washington, D. C. Olson is currently living in Belgrade, Serbia with her husband, a Foreign Service Officer, and their son Nicolas.