



Socarides, Richard (b. 1954)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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As an advisor for President Clinton, Richard Socarides was the first openly gay man to serve in a prominent White House staff position. As the son of psychoanalyst Charles Socarides, who based much of his practice on "curing" homosexuals through so-called "reparative therapy," he also personifies the rift in psychiatric theory and practice regarding gay people that took place in the 1970s.

Richard was the first son of the elder Socarides' four marriages. While his father was championing his theory of homosexuality as a pathology caused by an emotionally "smothering" mother and a distant father, Richard was contending with his own attractions toward males, which were evident to him by ninth grade.

In a 1999 interview in the *Washington Post* the younger Socarides recalled how he learned to compartmentalize his romantic relationship with a classmate, which he described as "exhilarating and terrifying," apart from his father's mind-set. He vowed that he would not let his father's work "jeopardize my life."

Sins of the Father

Charles Socarides was not only a psychiatrist who specialized in "converting" homosexuals to heterosexuals, but he also became one of the most vocal opponents of the American Psychiatric Association's 1973 decision to remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders.

A rabid critic of the glbtq movement for equality just as his son was coming to grips with his life as a young gay man, the elder Socarides insisted that, using techniques such as aversion therapy, he "cured" thousands of patients, though the evidence for such "cures" was entirely anecdotal.

After the APA's decision to declassify homosexuality as a mental illness, Socarides helped found the North American Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), a chief sponsor of "reparative therapy," a practice that the board of trustees of the American Psychiatric Association recently described as dangerously misguided. The trustees asserted that "the potential risks of 'reparative therapy' are great, including depression, anxiety and self-destructive behavior, since the therapist's alignment with societal prejudices against homosexuality may reinforce self-hatred already experienced by the patient."

When the elder Socarides died on December 25, 2005, anthropologist Gilbert Herdt, director of the National Sexuality Resource Center in San Francisco, spoke for many gay men and lesbians when he remarked that "[Charles] Socarides outlived his time. He became a kind of anachronism, and a tragic one in the sense that he continued to inflict suffering on the lives of some gay and lesbian individuals and the L.G. B.T. community in general."

Education and Apprenticeship

Despite his championing of the "sickness theory" of homosexuality, which later endeared him to the

religious right, the elder Socarides in the 1960s held liberal political views that Richard also adopted. During his student years, Richard supported John Lindsay's mayoral campaign in 1965 and worked for Eugene McCarthy's presidential bid in 1968.

To avoid bringing visibility to his personal life Socarides turned from politics toward law, receiving degrees from Antioch College in 1976 and Hofstra Law School in 1979. He joined Squadron, Ellenoff, Plesent & Lehrer, a prominent Wall Street firm, where he became a partner and remained until 1991.

By 1986 Socarides decided to come out to his father. Charles' initial anger cooled over the next several months to the point where his correspondence to Richard indicated a qualified acceptance of the news. Ironically, in the father's eyes their family dynamics only reinforced his theory of dysfunction. He had divorced his first wife when Richard was six and attributed his son's gayness to the strain of that separation. Father and son maintained a respectful but uneasy connection until Charles' death.

By the time he came out, Socarides had begun reevaluating his career in the light of his earlier interests. His sister's illness from cancer around this time (and eventual death) spurred a further assessment of his life goals.

Socarides renewed his activism through the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

He also became a campaign manager in New York legislative politics and worked briefly with Geraldine Ferraro's ill-fated campaign for the United States Senate. In the early 1990s he championed Senator Tom Harkin's run for the presidency, but soon signed on with the Clinton/Gore campaign after Clinton secured the Democratic Party's nomination.

White House Years

After the 1992 election the Clinton administration tapped Socarides to be White House Liaison for the Department of Labor.

Socarides served the White House in several capacities. In 1995 he helped organize the first White House Conference on HIV/AIDS. In May of 1996 he became a Special Assistant to the Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy and Political Affairs, acting as liaison to lesbian and gay communities.

He added other constituencies to his scope when Clinton named him Special Assistant to the President and Senior Advisor for Public Liaison in February 1997. In the fall of that year he directed the White House Conference on Hate Crimes and received a Courage Award from the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project. He also served as Chief Operating Officer of the 50th Anniversary Summit of NATO in April 1999.

All of these positions involved Socarides in planning, communications, and acting as spokesperson for administration policies. The latter role was often thorny when addressing glbtq constituencies.

Gay men and lesbians, a reliable voting block for Clinton in 1992, had great expectations of his presidency. However, fierce opposition from Republicans and social conservatives impeded progress on sexual minority rights. Many gay men and lesbians perceived Clinton as yielding or seriously compromising on these issues in order to salvage the rest of his program.

Clinton's early promise to integrate gays into the military backfired, producing the counterproductive "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy. When Hawaii's courts ruled favorably on same-sex marriages, Clinton felt obliged to

sign the Defense of Marriage Act prohibiting the federal government from recognizing such unions and permitting other states to refuse to recognize them as well.

Though the White House fervently endorsed the Employment Non-Discrimination Act and the Hate Crimes Prevention Act, both of which would have added sexual orientation to federal statutes, both failed in Congress, thanks to Republican opposition.

Socarides cited the closeness of some of these votes and support from high-ranking officials as signs of incremental progress. He urged gay voters to view the rancorous debates surrounding these measures as part of a necessary process of public education. He developed a reputation as an effective bridge builder within the administration.

Indeed, there were some successes. Clinton's nomination of philanthropist James Hormel as Ambassador to Luxembourg made him the first openly gay American to hold such a post. Executive orders banning sexual orientation discrimination in federal employment and issuance of security clearances survived Congressional opposition. In addition, White House influence averted Congress's attempts to ban gay men and lesbians from adopting children in the District of Columbia and to withhold federal funds from localities that enacted domestic partnership benefits.

At Socarides' urging, Clinton addressed the 1997 Human Rights Campaign annual dinner, the first time a sitting president had appeared before a designated gay and lesbian audience.

The Private Sector

In October 1999 Socarides resigned from the White House staff. He accepted vice presidential positions handling media relationships, first, at Robinson Lehrer & Montgomery Communications and, later, at AOL Time Warner. He also served as Vice President of the AOL Time Warner Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the company, helping to oversee an annual budget of \$20 million in corporate giving.

In October 2003 he became a senior vice president at New Line Cinema, where he managed media relations and helped position installment three of *The Lord of the Rings* to receive its record-setting eleven Academy Awards.

Socarides has credited the Clinton administration with "a record to build on." Encouraging gay men and lesbians to persevere in the ups and downs of electoral politics, he predicted that Clinton would be remembered as "a hugely important and transformational figure" in glbtq political progress.

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