



Sullivan, Harry Stack (1892-1949)

by Caryn E. Neumann

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The psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan, a gay man, developed the psychiatric program used by the American military during World War II to weed homosexuals out of the Army.

Harry Stack Sullivan was born on February 21, 1892 in Norwich, New York as the only child of farmers and the nephew of a lesbian aunt. He graduated from Cornell University in 1911 and then earned a degree from the Chicago College of Medicine and Surgery in 1915. In those years, psychiatry was in its infancy, and Sullivan apparently received all of his medical training in internal medicine.

Sullivan first gained military experience in 1916 as an Illinois National Guard sergeant with an infirmary attached to the Engineer and Signal Troops of the Twelfth Provisional Division. His service ended in 1916, but he applied to the Army and gained a commission as a first lieutenant in the Army Medical Reserve Corps in 1918.

Mustered out at the cessation of hostilities a few months later, Sullivan spent the next several years struggling to establish his career. In 1921, he went to Washington, D. C. to work at St. Elizabeth's Hospital for the Insane. In 1933, he co-founded the William Alanson White Psychoanalytic Foundation and, five years later, established the journal *Psychiatry*.

A slight, bespectacled man with thinning hair and a mustache who often displayed an abrasive side, Sullivan never declared himself to be homosexual, but his living arrangements imply homosexuality. In 1927, Sullivan met a fifteen-year-old boy, James Inscoe Sullivan, who became his lifelong companion and was commonly introduced as his adopted son. Colleagues assumed that the two were romantically involved.

By 1940, Sullivan had become one of the foremost psychiatrists in the United States and a member of the American Psychiatric Association's Military Mobilization Committee. As World War II approached, he sought to prevent the psychiatric casualties that had resulted during the brief involvement of the United States in World War I. Sullivan had also long been interested in enhancing the status of the psychiatric profession, and this opportunity to demonstrate the value of psychiatry may have been a secondary motive for his actions.

Sullivan convinced the War Department that a systematic, professional mental health screening process with limited attention to sexual issues would help the government avoid the immense cost of treating wounded soldiers. This screening would identify gay men. Sullivan believed that such men were not suited to military service.

Sullivan held that everyone possessed an emotional and sexual interest in both sexes, although behavior and the primary involvement usually center in one direction. Males normally passed through a homosexual phase, but men who remained homosexual suffered from faulty personality development. A Selective Service screening would work as a form of preventive psychiatry, a way of protecting gay men from sustaining damage.

Although Sullivan thought adult homosexuals suffered from faulty personality development, he did not see homosexuality as an illness and separated himself from most of his professional peers by advocating that gay men and lesbians should be accepted as is.

When Congress passed the Draft Act in 1940, Sullivan was asked to serve as part of a three-man psychiatric advisory committee to the Selective Service Director, Clarence A. Dykstra. In his newfound capacity, Sullivan recommended the appointment of over 30,000 local board examiners who would conduct psychiatric interviews no shorter than fifteen minutes, as well as the establishment of 600 Medical Advisory Boards with one psychiatrist each to review problem cases.

From January to July 1941, Sullivan planned and directed a series of regional two-day seminars for board examiners. In these seminars, described by Sullivan as "a child's guide to psychiatric diagnosis," he hoped to teach general practitioners enough psychiatry to enable them to make informed diagnoses.

The doctors never received a chance to demonstrate their skills. Sullivan resigned from the program in November 1941 when the Selective Service, now under the administration of Lewis Hershey, eliminated psychiatric examinations at local boards in favor of examinations at Army induction stations. Sullivan's idea of weeding out gay men remained in place though Army doctors never proved particularly adept at spotting them.

Sullivan spent his few remaining years seeing patients at his private practice and serving as a lecturer. A heavy drinker with a history of severe heart trouble, he died suddenly of a heart attack while at a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) conference in Paris, France on January 14, 1949.

Sullivan's story is that of the best intentions gone awry. He intended to help gay men, but the system that he helped to put in place marked homosexuality as a mental illness and contributed to the further stigmatization of gay men and women.

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About the Author

Caryn E. Neumann is a doctoral candidate in Women's History at Ohio State University. A past managing editor of the *Journal of Women's History*, her essays have appeared in the *Dictionary of American History* and *Notable American Women*, among other places.