

Sullivan speaks at Middlebury College continued from front page

between "political hate" (i.e. government-sanctioned hate—the Nazis, ethnic cleansing campaigns, apartheid) and "social hate," or bigotry. The latter he sees as intrinsic to human nature and to a free society. As such, he believes "not much" can be done about it beyond punishing violent expression and making sure the government itself is not propagating hatred. One can attempt to reduce hatred and increase tolerance through acts of inspiration, faith, and love, but, in his view, these attempts will ultimately fail, at which point it's best to simply "let go."

Though homosexuality was not the sole focus of Sullivan's visit, it figured prominently in his arguments and in listeners' questions. Sullivan's writings on homosexuality (including his books *Virtually Normal: An Argument About Homosexuality* and *Love Undetectable: Notes on Friendship, Sex, and Survival*) have been the cornerstone of his career and the primary source of the controversy surrounding him since he became, in 1991, the youngest ever editor of *The New Republic* magazine.

Why does what Andrew Sullivan has to say matter, and why does he piss people off so?

Why he matters is simple. As Sarah Schulman pointed out in her prickly interview with Sullivan in *The Advocate*, he is the "most visible gay person in the media of this country." His books sell. He writes for widely read, influential publications. When Larry King needs a homosexual to debate right-wing zealots, Andrew's the man. He's got access.

Access, of course, is one of the reasons Sullivan pisses people off at both ends of the

political spectrum. To many conservatives, with whom he aligns on a number of issues outside of gay rights, he's the precocious fag who's dragged the unpleasant topic of homosexuality into mainstream public discourse. His reasoned arguments, particularly on same-sex marriage, are hard to refute without seeming hypocritical or twisting logic into knots. He's well-mannered, devoutly religious, better looking than most of them. He isn't Larry Kramer.

To many gay people, particularly those with leftist leanings, Sullivan is a self-loathing traitor, a sex-phobic assimilationist, a prototypical privileged white male—not even an American white male!—holding his nose over the grassroots trenches while declaring himself spokesman for the movement, a free-market loving British snob who happens to dig boys: Maggie Thatcher toting a gym bag instead of a hairdo. Sullivan himself says that his most visceral critics are gay and uses this observation to bolster his claim that the most virulent hate can arise from the hated. And if this is the case, he theorizes—if it is the victimized rather than the powerful most likely to express their bigotry through violence—who are hate crimes laws really targeting?

Amid the brouhaha, where does Sullivan actually stand on gay issues? Like most of us, he believes gays should have the right to marry and to serve in the military. (He's said that once our demands for these rights have been met, we should throw a party and call it a day.) Unlike many of us, he opposes hate crimes legislation and private sector employment nondiscrimination laws because in them he sees a "germ of truth" to fundamentalist assertions we're

asking for "special," not "equal" protections. He views Stonewall not as the milestone that spawned the modern gay movement, but as part of its downfall. His now infamous *New York Times Magazine* piece titled "When Plagues End" was interpreted as Sullivan personally declaring AIDS over.

For many, these stands (as well as his stands on issues such as abortion and affirmative action) send up red flags. When Sullivan was first proposed as a potential speaker for Coming Out Week, those who weren't delighted reacted as if Pat Robertson had been suggested. Because Sullivan is an articulate, persuasive debater, he challenges the assumptions even of those who reject his views outright. This can make people uncomfortable, and angry. Those who automatically embrace Sullivan probably haven't thought hard enough; those who automatically dismiss him probably haven't either. It's easy to dispute some of Sullivan's more provocative ideas (he does play the provocateur), but it's hard to do so lightly.

Increasingly, Sullivan's work has become more personal, dealing openly and honestly with his struggles around faith, HIV, and relationships. This willingness to display vulnerability in his writing, without sacrificing the logical foundation for which he's known, is one of the things I admire about him, even when I disagree. I know Andrew Sullivan, unlike Pat Robertson, has the same goal we all do: making life better for gay people. Defining how best to do this is complicated, as complicated as defining hate, but when we listen respectfully to one another, far more positive. ▼

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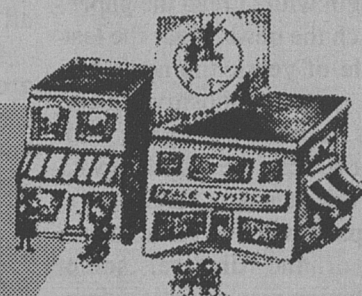
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