



by Mark Steyn

Wedding Bell Blues

Is Andrew Sullivan the marrying kind?

It was just before the November '94 elections and I was hosting a panel show on the BBC. We'd discussed U.S. foreign policy and Michael Huffington's Senate race and then someone mentioned the recent study which indicated that, contrary to received opinion, it wasn't swingin' singles who were getting tons of sex, but boring old married couples. "I found that survey very odd," said Andrew Sullivan. "I get more sex in a weekend than most of those people seem to get in a year." A few hours later, when the show was broadcast, the sex line had mysteriously disappeared, so I asked my producer what had happened to it. "Oh, I cut it," she said. "It was such a shame. After he'd been so good on Hillary and the congressional elections and Iraq, I thought it made him seem a bit silly."

I remembered the remark a couple of months back when, disclosing he was HIV-positive, Sullivan quit/was sacked from (delete according to factional loyalty) the editorship of the *New Republic*. Anyone who winds up defined by his sex life, weekend or otherwise, inevitably seems "a bit silly" — Bob Packwood, Charlie Sheen, the Kennedys, Bill Clinton — but it's a pitfall that the modern gay sensibility disdains. During that same BBC show, Sullivan himself observed that there was probably more male-on-male sex 100 years ago before anyone had invented the concept of "gay" as a lifestyle or a full-time occupation. Ah, happy days!

Today, being gay demands nonstop round-the-clock commitment. By the time

of his departure, Sullivan's huge accumulation of unique selling points seemed to have dwindled away to one: he was the first Catholic, the first Briton, the first Tory to edit the *New Republic*; but, by the end, what he was mainly was gay. They had a whip-round in the office and collected enough for a parting shot from literary editor Leon Wieseltier, who wished Andrew "a long and fruitful life" — which sly phrasing was subsequently revealed to be not a careless ad-lib but something closer to a calculated sneer. It falls to Sullivan, who says his generation will be the first to survive AIDS, to prove that a long life and a fruitful life are not, as they presently seem in our great cities, mutually exclusive.

Whatever happens, Sullivan has brought his camp followers to the brink of a great victory: the legalization of gay marriage. Even the passage of the hasty, poorly drawn Defense of Marriage Act is little more, from its very title down, than a dismal recognition that an institution central to Western society is on the defensive, if not yet on the ropes. Sullivan marshals a dazzling array of arguments, comparing the prohibition of gay marriage to the old laws on miscegenation, citing the Bible in his favor, and even flinging Pat Buchanan's childlessness back at him. The so-called Defenders of Marriage, on the other hand, stumble along unable to make a coherent case for an institution already enfeebled by divorce, adultery, trendy clerics, and a three-decade wallow in the right to instant self-gratification.

Tellingly, Bob Dole, who's never one to let stumbling incoherence stand in the way of delivering his thoughts on taxes, abortion, tobacco, whatever, shies away from this one — happy to pick a scrap with uni-

versally reviled bogeymen like Katie Couric or C. Everett Koop, but not so foolish as to get tossed a no-win hot potato like heterosexual marriage. Possibly he's unnerved by the strange tendency of so many Republican icons — from Newt to Bob Hope — to acquire lesbian siblings and offspring. (When I mentioned this to my near neighbor — the head of the White Mountain Militia — he said cheerily: "My sister is a lesbian person.") If they're honest, most people's (and probably Bob Dole's) objection to gay marriage runs along the lines of: "I dunno. It jus' don't seem right." The fact that that's no longer enough is the best evidence of how the other side's winning.

I've known a few gay marrieds — for example, a production manager on a TV special I did, who found a minister in Holland to pronounce him and his lover man and husband. Oh, and I once met Siggie and Bragi of the Sugarcubes, Iceland's biggest pop group (don't laugh; they were very big — or anyway very medium — in Britain, too). Siggie (short for Sigtryggur) was the drummer and Bragi (short for Bragi) was the bassist and they were brothers-in-law married to twin sisters. In 1989 they divorced the gals, moved to Denmark, and tied the knot, becoming the first gay newlyweds in rock history. Sooner or later, it's bound to happen with a couple of American celebrities.

And maybe it already has. Look at Disney's "Gay Day." This is a company so protective of its franchises that it once sued a guy in Florida for "unauthorized use" of its copyrights because he'd tattooed Mickey, Goofy et al. over 90 percent of his body. Yet it's happy to allow Gay Day — when DisneyWorld is turned into a playground for gay couples — to promote itself with posters showing Mickey and Donald holding hands, and Minnie and

Daisy doing the same—like an Uncle Walt version of the Bloomsbury group.

This is the new affirmative action. Hollywood has no interest in “family values” except in promoting “alternative” households as their true repository: the only nuptials on America’s cutest sitcom, “Friends,” have been between two lesbians; the “issue” dramas prefer scenarios like that on “Picket Fences,” where the crusty judge rules against the reactionary gran’mā and gives custody of her grandchild to the gay father and his lover.

I can’t say I blame the judge: by the end of the show, I was wishing they could adopt me, too. They were so sweet, so sober, so dignified, so responsible... and so unlike 90 percent of the gays I know. Homosexuals have complained for years about the lack of positive role models in the media. But turn the question around: When was the last time you saw a negative role model? In *The Birdcage*, the stereotypical right-wing senator winds up getting lectured by the middle-aged drag queen, a Barbara Bush lookalike: “I meant what I said about family values and the need for a return to morality.” The film preaches tolerance and understanding, yet won’t permit its gay couple so much as a peck on the cheek for fear of testing that tolerance. The only mention of AIDS is in reference to the two teenage heterosexuals.

These mainstream entertainments are smugly self-congratulatory about their progressiveness. In fact, albeit unintentionally, they adhere wholeheartedly to that fine Christian distinction between the sinner and the sin. They love the sinners, but they’re terrified of showing us the sin. Even as it embraces gays, Hollywood de-sexes them: these homosexuals are so untypical, they’re insulting. I prefer the straightforward honesty of gay authors like Edmund White, who writes elegant paeans to the “beauty” of anonymous sex, even the brief, nondescript, undistinguished encounter with the man who fatally infected him. I prefer that ferocious scourge of what he called “beery heterosexuality,” the late British film-maker Derek Jarman, who claimed to be in a long-term “monogamous” relationship in which he was nevertheless free to go trawling for rough trade in the bushes of Hampstead Heath every night, the ravages of AIDS notwithstanding.

I loathe homophobia—the word, that is. If you’re a classicist, “homophobia” doesn’t mean “anti-gay” but a fear (phobia) of the same (homo-). In a literal sense, the most homophobic people of all are male homosexuals: they have an almost pathological fear of the same. Whether or not Andrew Sullivan has more sex in a weekend than most folks have in a year, I cannot say. But most gay men—not the ones in “Picket Fences,” but real gay men—have more sexual partners in a year than most heterosexuals have in a lifetime. At one time, London AIDS clinics defined a woman as promiscuous if she’d had more than six sexual partners in her lifetime. They gave up trying to apply a workable definition to gay men when it became clear that those who’d had less than six in a year were almost statistically irrelevant. Sullivan resents Pat Buchanan’s “demeaning reduction of ‘what homosexuals do’ to a sexual act”—and he may have a point: the chief characteristic of modern homosexuality is not any particular sexual act but the number of partners required to perform them.

I don’t know what this says about gay sex. Quentin Crisp, the octogenarian “stately homo of England” now resident in New York, has suggested that the need for novelty is due to gay sex being somehow fundamentally unsatisfying. Certainly, when Edmund White hymns the beauty of anonymous sex, you feel he’s confused anal intercourse with banal intercourse. What’s undeniable is that even HIV infection rates of 50-60 percent among the gay populations of New York and San Francisco haven’t persuaded homosexuals of the virtues of reducing their number of partners to, say, those of an MCI “Friends & Family” calling plan. After fifteen years of AIDS, promiscuity isn’t the issue, but the need to practice promiscuity “safely”: gay activists berate the government for not allocating funds to invent a concrete condom; gay helplines patiently explain which existing extra-strength condom works best with which oil-based or water-based lubricant.

But nobody seems to question what it is in gay pathology that makes this awkward, non-erotic paraphernalia necessary. In the “Pride Week” special issue of *One in Ten*, a Boston publication, columnist Mubarak S. Dahir relates the story of Brian and his lover, both HIV-negative, who being in a

monogamous relationship decided to dispense with condoms; both are now HIV-positive. Deploring their decision to abandon condoms, Dahir advises gay men to “redefine our test of love for each other.”

Gays are very keen on “redefining,” and now it’s the turn of matrimony: backed by a mainstream culture that gets a kick out of gay chic, we drift towards some sort of formalization of gay relationships. *Pace* Sullivan, it isn’t the emancipation of the slaves, take two; unlike skin color, contemporary gayness is behavioral. It is, in that sense, quintessentially American: like NAAFA (the National Association for the Advancement of Fat Acceptance), gays want the rest of the country to make their self-indulgence respectable. Obviously, not all gays are promiscuous. But those that aren’t seem to be the least interested in gay marriage. Sir Hardy Amies, the Queen’s couturier, had the same partner for over two decades, but says, “If someone rings you up and says, ‘Can you come to dinner?’ the worst thing you can do is say, ‘Can I bring my friend?’ It is just too common for two men to go around together.”

Sullivan, by contrast, wants (so to speak) to have it both ways: to have his union blessed, and to have his license blessed. Homosexual marriage, he says, would be better served by the “openness of the contract,” which would be sympathetic of gay men’s need for “extramarital outlets”; there is no reason why the “varied and complicated lives” of gay men should be constrained by a “single, moralistic model.” In that case, why get married at all? You can see Sullivan’s point: a grisly plague has not furthered the cause of homosexual monogamy, so why should a permit from the town clerk?

But, even in all its weaknesses and evasions, heterosexual society still aspires to the ideal of matrimony—the requirement to “forsake all others.” Gay advocates’ contempt for fidelity is their Achilles heel, both literally and intellectually. It is on this ground that heterosexuals should stand and fight. Gay promiscuity is far more trivial and demeaning of themselves than any shaft from Pat Buchanan, for it suggests that gayness itself is irredeemably immature. It makes them look, well, a bit silly. ☛



Shah Arabia

Will the House of Saud go the way of the Pahlavis?

As a foreign correspondent covering Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe in the 1970's, I quickly developed a theory about the operations of the U.S. Department of State overseas that seemed as reliable as a law of physics: the greater the adversarial relationship between the U.S. and a foreign government, the smarter American diplomats seemed to be in figuring out what was going on. Conversely, foreign service officers working in the capital cities of close allies not only wouldn't see, they apparently *couldn't* see major problems of domestic unrest looming thickly on the horizon. I recall well the Alice-in-Wonderland efforts of a senior foreign service officer in Southeast Asia in 1974 to persuade me, then a young foreign correspondent, that Laos was really in no danger of succumbing to the Communists, home-grown or Vietnamese. How invigorating it was, by contrast, to listen to briefings from U.S. ambassadors and political officers in Prague or Warsaw when the great tectonic political shifts were beginning in Eastern Europe in the late 1970's. They may well have known more about the dissident figures who eventually came to power than the local secret police did.

That principle has surfaced in spades in the wake of two fatal bombing attacks on U.S. facilities in Saudi Arabia. Since the June bombing in Dahrán, administration officials have scrambled to placate us skeptics, pointing out the obvious differences between Saudi Arabia and Iran, whose pro-American government collapsed

almost overnight in 1979 once it became clear that Washington wouldn't come to the Shah's aid. Of course there are differences, but there are also deeply disturbing parallels. Much like Iran in the latter years of the Shah's regime, there is today in Saudi Arabia an unhealthy symbiosis of American arms manufacturers and the purchase orders of a rich but militarily weak ally; economic hardship after years of government profligacy; a government deeply hostile to democracy; and a home-grown religious opposition movement as resentful of the American presence as of the regime we are there to defend.

Washington officialdom has overlooked the reality of a serious and dangerous domestic opposition to the House of Saud in the heart of the Kingdom, in part due to the widespread belief that the "conservative" pro-U.S. states of the Arabian peninsula could only be destabilized from abroad. That may be true, but not in the way the U.S. expected: The Saudi government helped finance (and the U.S. helped train) an estimated 5,000 Saudis who fought in Afghanistan against the Soviets in the 1980's. Deeply radicalized by their experience and by contact with Islamic radicals from other countries, the veterans returned home angry, embittered—and equipped to become violent against it. The four perpetrators of the November 1995 bombing of an American training center in Riyadh, in which five Americans died, were all Saudis; three of them had fought in Afghanistan.

Although Saudi Arabia is arguably the most internally repressive regime in the world today, it has had a vigorous, well-financed, and recently highly visible inter-

nal opposition at least since the early 1990's. Islamic-based anger at the corruption of the royal family has been on the rise for years, lately fueled by economic resentment—as the price of oil has slid from \$40 a barrel in the early eighties to \$15 last year, per capita income has plummeted from an oil-fed \$17,000 in 1981 to \$7,000 by 1993. The national deficit of \$7 billion could have been covered more than twice by the personal fortune of King Fahd himself, estimated to be around \$20 billion.

Dislike of the conspicuous American military presence has also helped build the momentum of the opposition, which finally burst into the open in May 1993 with the formation, by six prominent religious scholars and clerics, of the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR). The Committee was banned soon afterwards, its founders arrested and interrogated, and several of its supporters dismissed from their jobs or deprived of their passports.

The founder who appeared to irritate the authorities the most was Mohammed Masari, a former physics professor who worked briefly as an educational attaché at the embassy in Washington. Masari was imprisoned for six months and, according to his account, tortured. Shortly after his release in 1994, he made a daring escape through Yemen to London, where he re-established the Committee.

That prompted a crackdown from the Saudi regime, which rounded up more than a hundred prominent clerics and scholars who had been critical of the government. Two were among the best-known anti-West scholars in the Arab world, Sheikh Salman al-Awdah and Sheikh Safar al-Hawali. Popular from the cassettes of their fiery speeches available throughout the Gulf countries, the two men have angrily denounced the American presence during the Gulf War—and then

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