Andrew Sullivan, True Believer

Gay America's most controversial British import has deeply rooted convictions about God and country. His fears run pretty deep, too.

April 1, 1997 By Larry Kramer

Andrew Sullivan is, for many of us, a man of mystery. In his native Britain, he'd probably be just one of many eccentrics that country prides itself on harboring. Perhaps that's why he chooses to live in America.

I like Andrew. I'm not certain, though, if I can tell you why. He has a nice smile. He's cute, sort of a gay Ralph Reed (though Ralph Reed always looks gay to me). And of course there's that British (or is it Oxford?) accent that's always so winning on this side of the Atlantic.

My problem with Andrew is I have difficulty understanding what he stands for, what he believes in, what he wants us to think and do. I'm uncertain what his basic text is. His message, whatever it is, is unclear.

Perhaps the best analogy I can think of is that when I hear or read Andrew -- particularly when we're trying to define ourselves to each other -- I feel like I'm talking to someone not speaking the same language I am. I don't mean a language like Urdu or Romanian. I mean a language like the biochemistry of newts. I tried to read his book, *Virtually Normal: An Argument for the Acceptance of Homosexuality*. I kept getting lost. I believe writing is about trying to make a case to the reader. I didn't understand Andrew's case. Even after reading a piece he wrote for *The New Republic* about why he didn't like me or ACT UP, I couldn't tell you what he didn't like about me or why he didn't approve of ACT UP. I just knew he didn't. And I was surprised when he told me that wasn't the case at all.

Is this some sort of special gift he has, an ability to be imprecise with such precision that he'll soon become editor of *The New York Times*? Or is this a tragic flaw he has that keeps someone with such potential from becoming what we need more than anything: A gay, HIV positive spokesperson, fresh, smart, personable, with access to the media and those in positions of power? I worry that Andrew represents something very typical of this moment in history: An inability to precisely enunciate the issues, to precisely identify our enemies and to draw concrete suggestions of what we must do.

But then perhaps I'm trying too hard to make him into what I try to do myself: Get out there on the line and give everyone hell for allowing the world to be such a shitty place for people with HIV. But

Andrew patently doesn't want to do this. Otherwise he wouldn't have waited three years to announce he was HIV positive. Otherwise he wouldn't have so quietly exited (quit? been fired from? pushed out of?) *The New Republic*, a pseudointellectual, morally bankrupt and strangely tired magazine he only occasionally improved. Otherwise, in so leaving, he wouldn't have abandoned the only soapbox he's likely to get from which the heterosexual audience he wants to convince would take him seriously. Otherwise he wouldn't have taken last year's *Vanity Fair* hatchet job on him with such a peculiar, quiet grace. Fighters shouldn't take any of this gonad-busting lying down. And Andrew, I believe, wants us to believe he's a fighter.

I want to believe Andrew's a fighter.

So what's this mixed message all about? He is terribly fearful of what people might say or think about him, which is a very bad characteristic for a fighter or a leader -- or a writer. Worse, he doesn't get angry back. Even worse, he doesn't seem to be a very curious person, in that he doesn't ask you questions. He doesn't seem very interested in you. I never knew a good writer (or a good spokesperson) who wasn't nosy. Further, by his own admission, he is ill-informed on AIDS politics and science.

Andrew wants us to believe he's a thinker. A deep thinker. A philosopher who went to Oxford and Harvard and who, because he studied the greats at the feet of other greats, only has to quietly spin out what he and his role models call reason. For that is how British gentlemen -- not to mention devout Catholics -- have done it for centuries.

Well, that is not how it happens in America. America doesn't like gentlemen, much less understand them. Andrew has a misunderstanding of his adopted land. He should study some of his fellow Brits who have emigrated here with greater success: Christopher Hitchens (much tougher); Tina Brown (much more wildly ambitious); her husband, Harry Evans (much more smarmy); Pamela Harriman (much more sexually voracious). No, the Brits who come here and succeed do so not because they stay Brits but because they become, while keeping their accents intact, American.

Andrew, for all his succumbing to gay clonedom -- he worries mightily about his hair loss, his looks, his body -- has remained a true Brit, the kind the Yanks will never understand. I lived in England for 10 years and can attest to the fact that there simply comes a point where you might as well be living in Siberia, for the width of the gulf between our understanding of each other.

The big difference, of course, is that Americans want to understand the British (we want to understand everything) and the English couldn't care less about understanding us, themselves or anything or anybody else. And, for some reason, it's considered bad taste for the British to want anything. (We, of course, want everything.)

This interview was conducted before the publication of Andrew's now infamous article in *The New York Times Magazine*, "When Plagues End: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic." I truly loathed this piece. Should anyone not know, it posited that triple-drug protease cocktails are going to end AIDS. Andrew, with some 600 T-cells going in, and taking 21 pills a day, presumably forever, wrote that he would be virus-free for life. The piece is filled with the messianic fervor of the true believer.

It is a rich white boy's fairy tale, almost racist in its total oversight of the rest of the world. I'm still aghast as I write this description. How could anyone on drugs for only a couple of months, on a regimen that's also in general release for not much longer, claim as factual so much that isn't?

While there are a few almost invisible caveats thrown in to save his ass should the millennium not arrive on Andrew's schedule, there's no doubt the article, and the way the *Times Magazine* presented it, believes HIV to be a thing of the past.

I wrote a letter to the editor of startling anger (they didn't publish it), which Andrew told me he did not wish to see. I could not bring myself to talk to him about this article, as I knew I should, until I calmed down. When we finally spoke, our conversation was filled with lobs back and forth of such petty bickering as: "The data is absolutely clear." "The data is not absolutely clear." "I'm a writer, not a politician." "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard you say." "Your reality is different from mine." "You cannot use terms like 'vast majority.'" He used words like "preposterous" a lot about my criticisms, and I used words like "balance" a lot about his presentation.

I was not taping the conversation and, in my state, my fingers could not keep up on the keyboard. It's probably just as well.

If anyone else had written this article, I would have tortured that person, but for all the damage I think it's done, I've passed beyond it, and him. Is that because there's something impermanent about him and his work, something transient and unmemorable? Is it because, as I have asked above, there is still something unformed about him so it's hard to take him seriously? I don't know. But somehow there doesn't seem to be enough weight about him yet to take him on as either friend or foe.

There is a comedy written by A.A. Milne (the creator of *Winnie-the-Pooh*) called *Mr. Pim Passes By*. I can't remember anything about it except its title, which suddenly pops into my head. Is this how Andrew Sullivan, for all his mysterious imprecision and his exegesis on homosexuality and his statements about AIDS' end, will come to be described -- *Mr. Sullivan passes by*?

I wonder if you'll feel you know Andrew any better after reading this interview. I hoped to rev Andrew up, if not to becoming a leader then at least to being a useful spokesperson. And I hope very much that he has, deep inside him, something important to say, something useful to deliver to our community. We need him a lot.

But I fear we're going to have to wait a bit. And hope.

Larry Kramer: You knew you were HIV positive for some three years before you publicly said so. Why?

Andrew Sullivan: At the very beginning, it was such a difficult thing for me to deal with personally that I wasn't ready. It's hard enough to deal with it in private, let alone in public. I think people need to have space if they need it.

LK: Were you surprised you tested positive?

AS: Yes. I was pretty stunned. I got tested every year and was negative. I thought I knew a little bit about this, but it was a different experience altogether to be on the other side of the curtain. The answer is: I just needed time to deal with it myself. But after a while, it was also clear to me that you have a responsibility to be publicly HIV positive. And so I wrestled a great deal with my own conscience about the level to which I should do that. And I had to take into consideration the fact that I was also running an organization this would affect, too, and the people at *The New Republic*. And there was my family, which needed to be brought along. I didn't want to do this without their understanding, and it took time for me to talk to them about it and for them to absorb it and be able to deal with it.

Another thing that came into play was that I was writing my book, and I was concerned that its arguments not be treated with kid gloves, not be overwhelmed by my being HIV positive.

LK: You didn't decide to write the book until after you found out you were positive?

AS: The book was my first salvo against the virus; it galvanized me to write. I didn't want [my disclosure] to look like a publicity ploy to get the book out there. People always ascribe the darkest motives to you. So anyway, the book came out and my closest friend died in the same week. From then on, I understood it was somewhat of a betrayal of my friend to be silent.

Maybe I should have done it beforehand. When I quit the magazine, it dawned on me, literally that evening, that I was going to talk to the staff the next day, that it would be a weird thing to leave such a place after spending five years there, three of which were with me being HIV positive, without telling the people I'd worked with that I had been doing my job in this awareness and with this issue in my head. I said to them at the meeting, It's not often in life you get a chance to ask yourself, "Do I really want to do what I'm doing? Is my life really what it's supposed to be?"

LK: I gather by the length of your answer that you have a little guilt about keeping your HIV a secret.

AS: Yes, I do. I have guilt.

LK: Good.

AS: I can honestly say that I tortured myself about this.

LK: You don't think it would have helped you at the magazine if you had announced it originally? You were an openly gay person there already.

AS: I still don't want anybody's sympathy officially. In a job like that you are so out there. Openly gay people, let alone openly HIV positive people, are the recipients of all sorts of strange emotions. I had to judge whether I could personally absorb all of that.

LK: Did Martin Peretz [*TNR*'s publisher] ever say thank you for keeping it quiet?

AS: No, he knew from the beginning and was extremely supportive. No one ever asked me to keep

it quiet. I was very much allowed my own decision in this area.

LK: Now you're writing a book about friendship, which I'd claim is an unusual choice of subject matter for you. You've been very involved in fighting for same-sex marriage. Why are you following that up with a book on friendship?

AS: I think our society in general completely undervalues and underestimates the importance of the social institution of friendship.

LK: Especially in Washington.

AS: Yes, there's some irony about writing about friendship in Washington. I think the Right has completely put on a pedestal the nuclear family and asked it to bear many more burdens than it possibly can. And I think the Left has put on a pedestal the notion of the community and the collective that is equally difficult to bear. And most people, if they operate successfully as human beings, have an intermediate sphere, which is often their friends. But why shouldn't our friendships have the same significance in our public discourses as the family? One thing the epidemic did to many people is show us the extraordinary power and resilience of friendship as the thing that helped us survive. And I think, actually, gay people have something to teach straight society about friendship.

LK: About many things.

AS: About many, many things. But this is one thing we do understand that many straight couples don't and have denied themselves. And their lives are impoverished because they lack these networks of support and understanding. Friendship is not always love and sweetness. It can often mean friction. It can often mean distance. It can sometimes mean telling hard truths to one another. But I know that it sustained me; I know that losing one of my closest friends forced me to reflect quite hard upon it, and it seemed the natural thing to write about next in a serious, sort of argumentative way.

LK: You mentioned you were putting together a book about same-sex marriage as well.

AS: It's no accident that the demand for equal and public recognition of our relationships should emerge out of such an experience as AIDS. And over the next 10 years, we are going to have the fight of our lives on this issue. I think that one of the roles I can play, and want to play, as well as being an activist and writer and speaker, is to actually try to provide some intellectual support structures for the debate. And this other book is really an attempt to bring together the best, most rigorous, thoughtful writing on same-sex marriage constitutionally, historically, politically, from right to left.

LK: In many instances AIDS was handled a lot better and more efficiently under George Bush than under Bill Clinton.

AS: A Dole presidency might have united the gay community. We are fatally co-opted by Clinton.

LK: What do you think of people like Richard Socarides and the various other gay leaders in

Washington? They seem to be ass-kissing to an incredible degree.

AS: They endorsed the president on the cusp of his signing a bill that throws HIV positive people out of the military. They endorsed Clinton before there was even a Republican alternative to judge. They threw away all leverage by early support of somebody who was clearly not on our side in many instances. I think you have to stick to your principles, and if that means you don't get invited to the White House cocktail parties, then so be it. I guess I have a sixth sense about being condescended to, and I can't bear it. I won't put up with it, and I don't know how anybody can. The great irony is that more people proportionately are being thrown out of the military under President Clinton than under President Bush.

LK: That's very important to underline.

AS: This is the co-optation point: It's covered by this bullshit policy, "Don't ask, don't tell," and people think it's been changed for the better. It's not. It's a cloak for something even worse. It's like, I will say the word gay in my acceptance speech for the nomination, unlike my opponent, but that will just give me cover for pursuing policies which are as bad, maybe worse, than the alternatives in the long run.

LK: What if, when you learned you were HIV positive, you had written an editorial in *The New Republic* saying: "I've just this minute found out that I am HIV positive," and then you listed all the reasons why AIDS has been allowed to happen, and you further said: "I think a very good case can be made that the straight world gave AIDS to us, just like the straight world allows drug addiction to be perpetuated eternally among people who have every good reason for wanting to escape the reality of feeling so shitty in their terrible lives."

AS: Yeah, well, I wasn't you.

LK: Well, now you have a chance to do me. I'm old and tired. We're both in love; you know that's very bad for being angry.

AS: Well, I'm afraid I've never been angry.

LK: But I think you are angry.

AS: At some deep level I am, I guess.

LK: Why is anger a dirty word for you?

AS: It's not a dirty word for me.

LK: Has the Catholic Church pacified your soul?

AS: I think anger can eat you up; it can consume you as a person.

LK: Why can't it be a tool to paint with? Why do you think it's automatically self-destructive?

AS: I think my feeling has been and still is that there are different ways to express anger, and one of them is to express it as such, to blame… to articulate. Another is to ask, "What does this anger

really mean?" And if we are right, and I think we are, to then channel that anger into uncompromising, consistent reasoning and positive arguments.

LK: But I think I do exactly that. Many of the people you admire, some of the great minds of all time, have certainly been hugely dissatisfied people.

AS: Obviously I'm dissatisfied. If I were happy with my life, if I weren't angry, I wouldn't be doing any of this. I wouldn't have come out as a gay person. I mean, at some point, that got me here.

LK: You talked, in your interview of me, about serenity (*POZ*, April/May 1995). And that the first part of the Christian notion is that this earth is not that important. And I called you to task on this. You also talked about my activism as an urgency you couldn't muster when you first came upon ACT UP.

AS: I think in some part of me, if I really let go, I don't know what I would feel.

LK: I want to see it, buddy!

AS: I've absorbed a lot over the past few years, and you know, I have a mixture of feelings about it. I know that for my own sake and for the sake of the arguments I want to make, I don't want to...

LK: Oh, bullshit. Tom Paine was an Englishman! You are one of our best thinkers, one of our best writers. Thomas Paine was not a nonangry man, and he wrote brilliantly. Do you think you'd have a breakdown?

AS: No, I don't think I would have a breakdown, although I'm afraid of losing it.

LK: Of losing what? Your temper?

AS: Yes. And in the process, blowing the common reason of what we have to say. I'm scared it would obscure the clear superiority of our arguments, and people would tune it out. I think you have to stay on message.

LK: Child of the media.

AS: My message is, "Don't get mad, get even." And if the anger is a slow burn, as it is in my case...

LK: I don't think we've seen the slow burn. I don't think any major argument has ever been won by reason. I think it's been proved that by revolution, by people in the streets, by visible demonstrations, by disobedience, that the squeaky wheel gets the most grease.

AS: I'm very passionate about what I believe in and try to say things as graphically as possible.

LK: I guess what I'm saying is that you are free now to do and say what you want. And you are an incredible tool for us, an incredible weapon, and that it wouldn't hurt to let it out. You're a very sympathetic person. You're attractive, you're intelligent, you've got a good image in the eyes of the snotty Americans who think the Brits are the be-all and end-all. Why are you so calm? Why are you so reasoned?

AS: Well, people turn around and blame me for it actually, and accuse me of manipulating...

LK: So what? Whatever you do and say, some people are going to like it and some people aren't. So say what you want!

AS: I am saying it! I don't think I've been mealy mouthed. I just think there's a limit to what is gained by assigning blame.

LK: Do you really believe life on earth is not that important?

AS: I think it is obviously important insofar as we are here, I believe, to witness certain truths and certain aspirations. I guess life is important and unimportant at the same time. Ultimately, I don't think we are creatures who are merely here. We have things to do, knowing that there is only so much we can do. Both to yourself and in front of God, you will be answerable for the way you conduct yourself. And concerning how one can be openly gay and a practicing Roman Catholic, the meaning of my faith in part is a call to be simply honest, insofar as I can be. And there is also knowing, ultimately, that each of us is an eternal creation and that these things shall pass away.

LK: Don't you think about immortality?

AS: I do, I do, but I think you have to have some detachment from that, or you will suffer when you fail, and when things don't work out, you will suffer complete depression and disappointment.

LK: Now we're getting to the fears! Why, just because you try something and don't succeed, do you suffer depression and fears? As the song goes, you pick yourself up, dust yourself off and start all over again.

AS: I have learned that.

LK: God knows I have.

AS: I don't think you could say that I have sort of hedged my bets, except maybe in delaying when I came out as being HIV positive.

LK: I hear from you such an understanding of what's wrong and what needs to be done, and also such a frustration that you're afraid to let loose for fear it will overwhelm you somehow. And so you've worked out this very fervent intellectual-cum-spiritual-cum-religious system of reasons based on your own Catholic upbringing and your philosophical training at Oxford and Harvard that protects you. And I guess I'm here to say that you won't be destroyed by letting those feelings out of you. You will in fact grow, and part of the expression of them will be of great value to help us achieve our fight, to achieve our victories.

AS: Is that a question?

LK: Talk about instant psychoanalysis!

AS: I'm not sure what any of that would mean in practice.

LK: It would mean being angry and calling a spade a spade.

AS: Look, in Washington, agendas operate all the time, and it's a vicious town. It takes a personal toll to sit there and absorb the hostility.

LK: What toll has it taken on you?

AS: I think, and this is one reason why I don't completely let go, I'm in here for the duration. I have to pace myself, what I can take, such as being in a television debate on same-sex marriage and having someone say you're sick because you're gay and you can be cured of being gay.

LK: I get 10 of those letters a day.

AS: I know. So do I. I literally got excrement sent to me in the mail.

LK: Welcome to the club. Call the police and investigate the letter. We found the guy who mailed shit to me. Do you think everyone is dropping AIDS as an issue now that we have the protease?

AS: I think that a very important corner has been turned. And that makes me all the more concerned that we really nail it.

LK: The only way it's going to be nailed is to get all the various combinations tested and into very fast studies.

AS: And good studies.

LK: And that isn't happening. They're not even being drawn up and the NIH and Jack Killen, who's supposed to run the trials at NIAID, are -- as always -- dragging their heels to an unconscionable degree. There's been no activist community, really, to exert the necessary pressure since ACT UP.

AS: I feel rather nervous talking about this, because I'm not as up on it as I probably should be.

LK: You certainly should be, particularly now that you're taking proteases. You said your doctor, Dr. Jerome Groopman at Harvard, did not prescribe them. Yet you decided to take not one but two proteases on your own?

AS: I decide everything on my own.

LK: I think we need to hear that.

AS: I also have a really good doctor in Washington. His name is Tim Price. He's a terrific AIDS doctor. When I got diagnosed, I realized that my entire relationship to these drugs and these issues had to be different than regular people have with their doctors. The only person who will save one's life is oneself, ultimately. And so I got all the studies and looked at them all, and I asked questions. I interviewed five doctors before I picked one. So I'm on the treatment regimen I want to be on, given what I think is true, to the best of my ability.

LK: How did you choose your two [protease inhibitors]?

AS: I guess my feeling from the beginning three years ago was that this is a chronic infection from day one, that it's not something that's doing nothing for 10 years and then suddenly killing you.

And I wanted to hit it with everything we could get as long as it seemed to be effective. Even marginally effective. And so it's my feeling that you have a strategy, and unless the evidence dramatically shows you to be on the wrong track, you stick with that strategy. My T's have stayed pretty stable for the past three years in basically the 500 -- 600 range.

LK: How do you think you got infected? From some of the questions in your interview of me, I thought you had some idea.

AS: I don't know whether that's something I want to get into.

LK: You don't think your example can be useful to others?

AS: It certainly was not through unprotected anal sex. That's for sure.

LK: I didn't realize until I reread your interview of me that you'd asked me an enormous number of questions about oral sex.

AS: I almost certainly contracted it through oral sex.

LK: You're the second friend of mine whom I've heard this from recently.

AS: And not even to ejaculation. I mean, just through pre-cum, which is why it was so stunning for me to find out. And I'm not the only person I know who says this. Of course, people look at you and they think, poor love, she's completely in denial. But honestly, I'm the sort of person that if there were an incident I could point to and blame myself for, I would. I would beat myself up about it. The truth is that I -- over a period of five years of basically having that rule, that I would have no unprotected anal intercourse and no oral sex to ejaculation -- thought I was safe. I was clearly wrong. And some of the studies do suggest that it's possible for this to take place. It's clearly much less likely than other modes of transmission.

LK: Tell me -- why did you come to America?

AS: I got a scholarship to Harvard.

LK: Why did you stay?

AS: Because I really love this country. I feel very connected to it, and I was always rubbing up against the most awful things in England that drove me up the wall. When I got here I felt like I'd come home. The American sort of directness, simplicity, brashness, vibrancy were all things I felt were part of my personality.

LK: Why are you a conservative?

AS: What does that mean?

LK: To me it means ass-dragging.

AS: Socially, my views are regarded as extremely liberal. But I am somebody who's always been skeptical of large bureaucratic government and high taxation and limited individual liberty.

Skeptical of all those things. And that places me firmly and more sympathetically in many respects to the economic policies of Republicans than I am to traditional Democrats. On the other hand, like most people, I'm a complicated person and don't fit easily into this liberal-conservative camp. But I think it was used against me, frankly, by people who wanted to stigmatize me and say you don't have to listen to this guy because he's a conservative.

LK: We just have to rev up your right hook and not let these things bother you.

AS: I think I feel incredibly better for being openly HIV positive. I want to defeat the ominous. And you can't hide and defeat the ominous. It all has to be out there. Just as you can't hide and expect the world to change on the issue of homosexuality. That I sort of know. And it was horrible for three years to be back in the closet. Horrible. I hated it. And I knew as soon as I quit [*TNR*] that in order to start my life over, I would have to get this out. In order to confront it. And I am immeasurably more confident and stronger as a result, and insofar as I can tell people and encourage them to do that, it's a good thing. They should not be afraid. It's actually ok and... in fact, I think it's important.

LK: Is there anything we haven't covered that you would like to talk about? Or defend yourself from? Have I attacked you needlessly on anything?

AS: No, no.

LK: I mean, you haven't even talked Catholicism.

AS: No. Thank God. Except, of course, that this whole experience of being HIV positive was very, very challenging spiritually.

LK: How so?

AS: I was angry at God in a deeper way than I had ever been before. I experienced the most profound spiritual crisis of my life and had some of the deepest, most religious experiences of my life in those few months and was forced really back to square one, as if God came in and shook me to my foundations. And although I had never previously considered the possibility that God did not exist, I did consider a more troubling possibility. Which was that God was evil. There were honestly 15 minutes of my life -- I remember them -- when I thought God was evil. They were the loneliest 15 minutes of my life.

LK: So what happened? You came out of it with a stronger faith?

AS: Yeah. And not by my doing.

LK: I shall keep my mouth shut because those are a very moving few sentences.

AS: It's true. I mean, I've never, never, ever been there before. Never. And I hope I never go there again.

LK: Well, there are those who would say that's what misfortune is for, so God can test you.

AS: I did feel that was what was going on, in some very profound way. And I've tried,

subsequently, to remember how I felt to keep it in my mind, not to return constantly to everydayness. To remember the kind of existential questions that one confronts with an HIV diagnosis. And to live one’s life as best one can with the knowledge one gained at that time. This transition is not, for me, a retreat. It is actually a way to make more clear what I want to do with life.

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