



## Secret City Recounts the Gay History of D.C.

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*Secret City: The Hidden History of Gay Washington*, by James Kirchick, Henry Holt and Co., 848 pages, \$29.99

During J. Edgar Hoover's 48 years as FBI director, people often gossiped about whether his bedroom tastes were as straight as his agents' marksmanship, citing everything from his fondness for socializing in male groups to his close relationship with longtime deputy Clyde Tolson. Spreading such rumors might earn you a visit from the FBI itself: As James Kirchick relates in *Secret City*, the bureau made it a practice to "detect, hunt down, and intimidate private citizens who spoke ill of the director."

Among the persons brought in for grilling sessions on this sensitive topic were the owners of a diner and a hair salon, an American visiting London, a prison inmate, and a woman who had gossiped about the director at a bridge party. In the last case, the party's hostess told a nephew in the FBI what had happened, whereupon the agency's Cleveland branch ordered the talkative partygoer—described in notes as an "old maid schoolteacher"—to report to its field office for questioning. The woman, whose unease at getting such a summons may well be imagined, apologized profusely for spreading the report, spelled out exactly where she had heard it herself (on a trip to Baltimore, from a group of young men at the next restaurant table), and promised to use the next bridge get-together to tell every attendee that her statement had been unfounded.

As a history of gay D.C., *Secret City* is itself full of high-grade gossip, and I mean that as a compliment. But Kirchick is up to serious business as well. He is not much concerned with the physical city, whose elegant avenues were laid out at President George Washington's behest by the French-born architect Pierre Charles L'Enfant ("a lifelong bachelor described as 'sensitive in style and dress' and as having an 'artistic and fragile temperament'"). Kirchick's focus is homosexuals' relationship to high-level national politics, as defined by both actual and potential public scandal, and to the federal government, which in 1953 imposed a wide-ranging employment ban whose repercussions lasted for decades.

According to long-received wisdom in anti-gay circles, homosexuality tends to flourish in government work and especially in the effete and cosmopolitan precincts of the foreign service and the State Department, thanks to gays' wily networking skills and mastery of social life.

Plausible? Well, Kirchick's early chapters (he begins with President Franklin Roosevelt's administration) are indeed heavy on scandals involving diplomats and other foreign service professionals. And not just American ones: Spain's World War II-era embassy constituted "an endless bacchanal, albeit one meticulously designed to elicit valuable information for the fascist regime of Generalissimo Franco."

But no conspiracy theories are needed to account for why gays have long been well-represented in well-traveled government service and in the higher reaches of politics. It is the same logic that has applied during the same period in entertainment, travel, and hospitality: "Some of the most important prerequisites for success in Washington—the ability to work long hours on a low government salary, a willingness to travel at a moment's notice, prioritizing career over family—are more easily attained by men without a wife and children to support."

As for social life, it's true that after-hours events were once central to the Washington scene, peaking perhaps in the party-mad Kennedy and Reagan administrations. That reality created niches for social specimens like the "walker," a suave fellow "who escorted the wives of powerful and busy men to parties." To be sure, that was a long time ago. If you're into D.C. power networking these days, your time is better invested in getting to know parents whose kids go to the same elite school as yours (which does not keep low-information populists from obsessing over Georgetown cocktail parties).

Even in its heyday, how much of a problem did this situation pose for good governance? It was widely believed, especially at the Cold War's height, that gays posed a national security risk because they are (or were) readily blackmailed. But the evidence for that is lacking. "In 1991," Kirchick writes, "the Department of Defense published a study analyzing the cases of 117 American citizens who had either committed or attempted to commit espionage since 1945. Only 6 were gay, and none of them had done so under the threat of blackmail."

Many vivid characters in Kirchick's postwar narrative combined ardent anti-communism with nonstandard sexual interests. The Communist-turned Cold-Warrior Whittaker Chambers was tormented by (and renounced) his same-sex inclinations. That one-man Chernobyl of legal ethics, Roy Cohn—"At 15, he had already arranged his first kickback"—tripped up his demagogic sponsor, Sen. Joe McCarthy (R-Wis.), through his persistence in trying to secure favorable Army treatment for a soldier with whom he was infatuated. Columnist Joseph Alsop became a target for Soviet blackmail after a Moscow indiscretion, which he courageously blunted by preemptively disclosing the guiltiest bits to various organizations in a position to care. He went on to take a staunchly anti-Soviet line, and the Kremlin never used the material. (Allen Drury, who may or may not have been heterosexual, wrote *Advise and Consent*, a 1959 novel fictionalizing the real-life suicide of a senator from Wyoming. It deftly combined a robustly conservative take on national politics with a plea for gay acceptance.)

When moral panic hit, the ensuing Lavender Scare lasted longer than the Red Scare it accompanied. Several people you might expect to have known better endorsed, helped draft, or helped put into effect President Dwight Eisenhower's infamous Executive Order 10450, which aimed to drive gays out of the government. Among them: the closeted Eisenhower adviser Robert Cutler and the New Deal icon (and Boston-marriage participant) Frances Perkins.

Executive Order 10450 applied to all federal employees, not just those with security-sensitive jobs, so "curators at the Smithsonian Institution and veterinarians at the National Zoo" had to go too. Every federal agency was obliged to investigate both new hires and existing employees, and the order also applied to private companies with government contracts. (The use of government contracting strings to impose awful policy is not new.) It's hard to know how many employees lost jobs, but estimates start at 7,000, to which must be added many more who resigned preemptively or knew not to apply.

By way of ideological underpinning, State Department security chief Scott McLeod sought to commission an official monograph "on how homosexuality had spurred the collapse of great civilizations throughout history." (This project was scrapped after his researcher "concluded that gays could not be blamed for the downfalls of ancient Rome and Greece.") The same McLeod, truly a petty officer, ordered retaliatory investigations of a foreign service officer overheard calling him a "jumped-up gumshoe," eventually forcing the officer out.

On the wider national scene, the issue was shaped by what Nixon adviser Murray Chotiner later described as the most important rule of politics: "Destroy your opponent." Both camps used factual allegations—and, when it served, entirely fictitious ones—to harm promising candidates on the other side. One problem in figuring out who was actually gay in American political history, in fact, is that opponents spread false rumors about so many figures. (J. Edgar Hoover himself? Unproven.)

Following the wise practice of an editor who once told me that history is most palatable to the reader when written through character stories, Kirchick traces the arcs of dozens of characters, high and low, famous and obscure. They include Oliver Sipple, who deflected an assassin's bullet aimed at President Gerald Ford and then died in misery after the resulting publicity caused his family to disown him, and Franklin Kameny, the magnificently obsessive astronomer who spent decades fighting the federal ban. Kirchick also covers a black lesbian crime boss, the gay-bookstore owners who installed a large window that made customers visible to sidewalk passersby, and various murder victims whose deaths long passed with little public investigation or notice. This broad sweep should make this book the standard on its subject.

By the 1960s, public attitudes were changing. Kirchick argues that the brilliant civil rights strategist Bayard Rustin—yet another anti-communist—deserves note as the first public figure to survive the truthful revelation of a gay scandal. The story winds down in the early '90s, amid the controversy over politically motivated "outing" and the horrors of AIDS, which by striking down hundreds of thousands of men in the prime of life did far more to make straights realize they'd known gay people all along.

At that point, few imagined the extent to which, a generation later, gays would have assimilated to bourgeois norms. Today we have an openly gay transportation secretary, and the biggest controversy he has sparked so far was over whether he took too much paternity leave.

While many of his individual tales are unhappy, Kirchick draws optimism from this broader "story of openness triumphing over concealment." As he rightly says, that sea change is "a

magnificent accomplishment of the liberal society, enabled by the fundamentally American concepts of free expression, pluralism, and open inquiry."

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