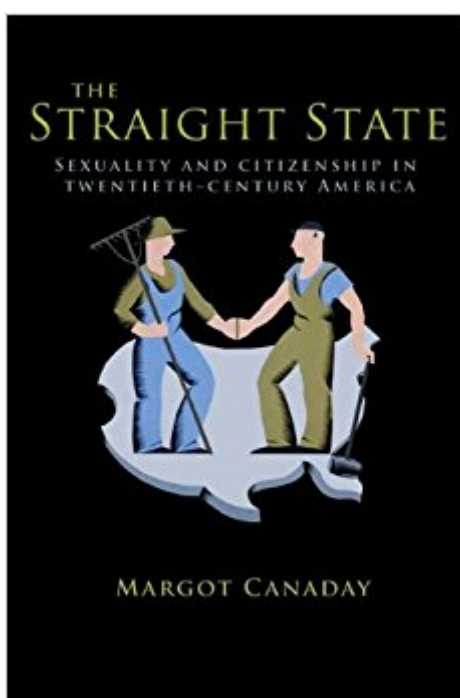


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# The Straight State: Sexuality And Citizenship In Twentieth-Century America (Politics And Society In Modern America)



## Synopsis

The Straight State is the most expansive study of the federal regulation of homosexuality yet written. Unearthing startling new evidence from the National Archives, Margot Canaday shows how the state systematically came to penalize homosexuality, giving rise to a regime of second-class citizenship that sexual minorities still live under today. Canaday looks at three key arenas of government control--immigration, the military, and welfare--and demonstrates how federal enforcement of sexual norms emerged with the rise of the modern bureaucratic state. She begins at the turn of the twentieth century when the state first stumbled upon evidence of sex and gender nonconformity, revealing how homosexuality was policed indirectly through the exclusion of sexually "degenerate" immigrants and other regulatory measures aimed at combating poverty, violence, and vice. Canaday argues that the state's gradual awareness of homosexuality intensified during the later New Deal and through the postwar period as policies were enacted that explicitly used homosexuality to define who could enter the country, serve in the military, and collect state benefits. Midcentury repression was not a sudden response to newly visible gay subcultures, Canaday demonstrates, but the culmination of a much longer and slower process of state-building during which the state came to know and to care about homosexuality across many decades. Social, political, and legal history at their most compelling, The Straight State explores how regulation transformed the regulated: in drawing boundaries around national citizenship, the state helped to define the very meaning of homosexuality in America.

## Book Information

Series: Politics and Society in Modern America

Paperback: 296 pages

Publisher: Princeton University Press; unknown edition (July 25, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0691149933

ISBN-13: 978-0691149936

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.8 x 9.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 6 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #56,185 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #8 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > International & World Politics > Canadian](#) #11 in [Books > Gay & Lesbian > Nonfiction > Civil Rights](#) #15 in [Books > Gay & Lesbian > History](#)

## Customer Reviews

Winner of the 2012 Biennial Book Award, Order of the Coif  
Winner of the 2011 John Boswell Prize, Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History  
Winner of the 2010 Ellis W. Hawley Prize, Organization of American Historians  
Winner of the 2010 Lambda Literary Award, LGBT Studies by the Lambda Literary Foundation  
Co-Winner of the 2010 Gladys M. Kammerer Award, American Political Science Association  
Winner of the 2010 Lora Romero First Book Publication Prize, American Studies Association  
Winner of the 2010 Cromwell Book Prize, American Society for Legal History

"It is not really news that inhabitants of the United States are governed by what historian Margot Canaday calls, in the title of her excellent book, a 'straight state.' For some time now, scholars of sexuality (following in the footsteps of those who have studied and challenged the race and gender hierarchies embedded in state policies and actions) have professed the analytical goal of what historian Lisa Duggan, writing in 1994, called 'queering the state.' These scholars have argued that the supposed naturalness of the heterosexual couple, and the unnaturalness of alternatives, is presumed and reinforced in the ordinary workings of government. Canaday's substantial contribution is to trace, in gripping and at times horrifying detail, exactly how the United States came to operate in this fashion over the course of much of the twentieth century. The Straight State provides a compelling history of the designation of 'the homosexual as the anticitizen.' . . . The Straight State is a captivating, engagingly written work of social, political, legal and sexual history, and the fruit of an extraordinary attention to archival documents."--Steven Epstein, Nation

"[Canaday] succeeds in . . . contributing brilliantly both to understandings of the relationship between state practices and the construction of identity and to the story of the rise of the modern bureaucratic state as a sexual state. . . . [This] book . . . presents a fascinating reframing of a familiar story and opens substantial new space for related research."--Julie Novkov, Perspectives on Politics

"[The Straight State] is a pathbreaking, riveting historical study. . . . [Canaday's] brilliant book is revelatory."--David A. J. Richards, Law and History Review

"Princeton Professor Margot Canaday has presented us with a superb and groundbreaking analysis of the role of federal institutions in shaping the LGBT identity over the course of the 20th Century. . . . Professor Canaday's work satisfies in a way all too rarely encountered in contemporary historical writing. The Straight State opens our eyes to the role of evolving federal policies in immigration, welfare, and the military in defining homosexuality and the gay persona. . . . The Straight State is indispensable to the student of modern queer history."--Toby Grace, Out in Jersey

"Canaday contends that the emergence of state bureaucracy in the 20th-century US may be tracked through its developing definition and regulation of homosexuality. . . . While some scholars may debate the author's

particular inferences from her evidence, this volume opens new ground in gender research."--Choice"The Straight State makes three outstanding contributions: it delineates the state as a whole fresh category in the formation of gay identities; elite reform becomes more important than bottom up revolution; while she moves gay history, convincingly, right into the mainstream of historical inquiry. Canaday has, therefore, produced an extremely important book."--Kevin White, Journal of Social History"Canaday offer[s] a much more complete record than has previously appeared in print of the law of gay-straight discrimination and its meaning in people's lives."--Felicia Kornbluh, Law & Social Inquiry"[An] absorbing account of federal policies, [this study] makes an important intervention by showing why historians of sexuality need to pay more attention to questions of citizenship and the practices of the administrative state."--George Chauncey, American Historical Review"[This] book contributes to an ongoing body of lesbian, gay, bi, and transgender theoretical, historical, and social research in fascinating new ways, revealing the extent to which normative critiques continue to inform queer theory and structure queer lives."--Jaime Cantrell, Feminist Formations

"A groundbreaking study that wholly revises our understanding of sexuality, citizenship, and the state. Canaday asks how and why the emerging federal bureaucracy came to define, regulate, and exclude gay men and lesbians, and her answers take us into the inner workings of the state's policing machinery. This is an important book."--Joanne Meyerowitz, author of How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States"In this brilliant retelling of the making of American citizenship, Margot Canaday links changing understandings of national identity to changing understandings of sexuality. Her indefatigable research and wise analysis demonstrate that political judgments about immigration, military service, and welfare have been soaked with judgments about what counts as normal--or 'degenerate'--sex. The history of federal bureaucracy is suddenly a page-turner."--Linda K. Kerber, author of No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship"This is a terrific, complex, highly original, revelatory book. Canaday very effectively argues that the powers of the federal state and the definition of 'a homosexual' as a person grew up in dynamic relation to one another in the first half of the twentieth century. Every chapter contains fascinating new material, superbly shaped to advance her narrative. I am sure this will be an influential book."--Nancy F. Cott, author of Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation

interesting ideas...

In "The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America", Margot Canaday works to dispel the notion that "the extreme state repression of sex and gender nonconformity in the mid-twentieth century was a result of the sudden visibility of gays and lesbians during and after World War II" (pg. 2). Her scope, then, focuses on how the government defined homosexuality beginning in World War I, through the Depression, and finally during and after the Second World War with the advent of the G.I. Bill. While military and governmental personnel did their part in defining homosexuality prior to World War II, the G.I. Bill, more than any other piece of legislation, tied the gender roles associated with heterosexuality to the concept of proper citizenship. This bill serves as the focal point of Canaday's argument. Canaday begins her chapter on the G.I. Bill arguing, "The suggestive and symbolic removal of the sexually deviant from federal relief has morphed into the actual removal of homosexuals from programs for veterans' benefits" (pg. 139). The social stigma associated with receiving an undesirable, or "blue," discharge prevented many veterans from using the advantages offered through the G.I. Bill and thus gaining the ideal rewards of American citizenship (pg. 145). Though the military initially used the blue discharge for a number of offenses, including drunkenness, the discharge soon transformed into a code for those dismissed due to homosexual acts or tendencies. Further, while the language of the G.I. Bill only prohibits those dishonorably discharged from taking advantage of its benefits, the Veterans Administration took the responsibility for determining which blue discharges were acceptable for benefits. The Veterans Administration, in explicitly linking homosexuality with undesirability, condemned American veterans who, despite serving their country, belonged to a different gender than those in power. In denying benefits to those discharged for homosexuality, the Veterans Administration created a group of second-class citizens to whom the benefits of a college education or a home loan were not available. The 1957 Doyle Bill, intended to offer relief to those given blue discharges for behaviors other than homosexuality, further reinforced gender lines. Doyle's rehabilitation program identified those who had married, started families, and sought employment as most likely to deserve rehabilitation. All of these traits fit in with traditional ideas of manhood. Tellingly, one congressman described a veteran deserving of this program as having "assumed the position of a man" (pg. 166). The use of binary language indicates that the other choice was the position of a woman, which would equate the veteran with a homosexual in the eyes of the government. Canaday summarizes this program, "In continuing the World

War II-era practice of using the undesirable discharge for soldiers discharged for homosexuality, the military increased the association between undesirability and homosexuality (pg. 167). The entire program served as a self-perpetuating system for ensuring only those that met strict heterosexual gender standards received rewards and full citizenship from the government. Canaday's book demonstrates that the government defined homosexuality more than homosexuals themselves. Concepts of manhood played a significant part, but the desire to prosecute or deny benefits, especially in the case of the G.I. Bill, dominated the discourse surrounding homosexuality. This discourse of punishment explains why homosexuality continues to suffer from a social stigma in the United States to this day.

Margot Canaday's *Straight State* is an eye-opening and occasionally entertaining account of the ways in which the national government helped to construct modern understandings of homosexuality and heterosexuality throughout the twentieth century. Canaday begins with harrowing tales of medical inspection predicated on bogus scientific theories linking homosexuality, physical deformity and dependence on state aid. She then goes on to detail the ways in which the military culture during and between two World Wars first challenged dominant conceptions of "gender inversion" and then consolidated alternative theories of sexuality predicated on desire. Finally, in the most engaging sections of her work, she shows how the post-war military complex and immigration law helped to shape public conceptions of lesbianism and the connections between sexuality and citizenship respectively. At times Canaday's style of writing and analysis can be a little on the "dry" side, but she approaches an important and previously understudied aspect of sexual and legal history with great skill and erudition.

Though I've never been much of an activist, I consider myself fairly well informed about the challenges faced by gay and lesbian individuals in dealing with federal laws and bureaucracies that have long chosen to ignore us, if not directly put obstacles in our path to equal rights under the law. I believed most of the latter policies were enacted since World War II, and had no idea - until I read this book - that such blatant discrimination was a part of federal policies since the beginning of the 20th Century, at least as regards homosexual males (Lesbians were not a priority, it seems, until around World War II.) Ms Canaday, an assistant professor of history at Princeton, provides an exceptionally detailed and complete study of federal policies dealing with homosexuality, focusing on three areas: immigration, the military and social benefit programs. The information is provided in a clearly cohesive and logical order, despite the fact that the laws and policies she discusses were

neither. The book contains copious footnotes, not just cites but detailed explanations of items mentioned in the main text, making the book accessible to the casual reader as well as for scholarly research. It is shocking to read about some of the longstanding policies of screening immigrants for "homosexual tendencies," and very interesting to read how early attitudes toward gays and lesbians in the military have evolved in the latter half of the century, eventually giving way to the faulted "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy we live with today. The inclusion of social programs in the analysis is important, as the entitlement to such programs was frequently used to justify the exclusion of homosexuals from the military or immigration. An impressive, important work, valuable to anyone who wants a better understanding about where our fight for equal rights has been, in order to better plot a course from here. Five scholarly stars out of five.- Bob Lind, Echo Magazine

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