



Washington

VINCENT RICARDEL FOR THE ADVOCATE

Insider out

A Reagan appointee lifts the curtain on the closeted world of powerful gay conservatives

By Trey Graham

Among the unwritten, inflexible codes of behavior that govern life in the nation's capital, these are the most inviolable: Don't tell tales out of school, or you'll never be trusted again. Don't air your grudges in public, because you never know when you'll need a favor. And above all, don't talk about sex where anyone can hear you—especially if you're gay.

Meet W. Scott Thompson, conservative establishmentarian and

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outspoken gay man. In a new memoir called *The Price of Achievement: Coming Out in Reagan Days*, he breaks all these rules.

"I think the powerful closeted person is going to feel slightly threatened, but he is going to feel on balance that I've done what he should have done," Thompson says with what some would call mind-boggling optimism. "And therefore he's going to feel—depending on his attitude toward me personally—proud, supportive, maybe a little bit wound up to do something about his life."

You'd think somebody with Thompson's credentials would be more pragmatic, less likely to cut loose from the pinstriped Washington herd. A Rhodes scholar, Thompson went on to teach foreign policy at Tufts University's respected Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. He married the oil heiress daughter of Paul Nitze, the former secretary of the Navy and legendary arms negotiator, and for a time became Nitze's protégé. He worked in the

Defense Department under President Ford and was the nation's chief propagandist during the first Reagan administration. He still sits on the board of the U.S. Institute for Peace, to which Reagan appointed him, and he's a member of the influential Council on Foreign Relations.

What's more, Thompson's relish for the insider's life couldn't be more apparent. It shows in every reference to high-placed friends, every allusion to "important dinner parties," every mention of his membership at the ultraestablishment Metropolitan Club.

But now, in the pages of a memoir for all of Washington to see, Thompson has chronicled his bitterly contested divorce, his falling-out with Nitze, and his emergence from the closet. "To some people," he acknowledges, "it's going to look like kind of a bathroom exegesis,

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and they're going to say this really was unseemly." That may be a bit of an understatement; Thompson's book might just cost him the keys to the kingdom.

"He's a pariah," says Leon Wieseltier, literary editor at *The New Republic* and an old friend of Thompson's. "Scott has now effectively cut himself off from the ideological and political universe in which he has lived for 20 years."

"That's a safe bet," says Janne Nolan, a foreign relations fellow at the Brookings Institution, a Washington, D.C., think tank, and another longtime friend. But if Thompson is going to lose his place in the policy establishment, is it necessarily because he's decided to write about gay issues—"to confront the order of things," as he puts it? Or is it because he's also decided to settle some scores?

In a narrative that's as bitter at times as it is thoughtful at others, he lashes out at Paul Nitze, who, he says, tried to destroy him using legal and illegal channels as well as his not inconsequential personal connections. On evidence that wouldn't last a minute in court, he outs both Nitze and former Oklahoma senator David Boren. (Nitze refused comment for this article; Boren has previously denied that he is gay and did so again through a spokesman.) Thompson goes on to claim that Nitze's influential positions on Soviet military power, especially his famously off-target "missile gap" thesis of the early '60s, sprang from insecurities related to his purported homosexuality.

And Thompson discusses his own affairs and relationships—including a surf-side dalliance with a member of Britain's royal family (the late Prince William of Gloucester, son of Princess Alice, Queen Elizabeth II's aunt), a series of orgies attended by members of a military junta in '60s Ghana, and a long and allegedly exploitative liaison with a Washington physician who, Thompson claims, has a penchant for larceny. (When contacted by *The Advocate*, the doctor—identified only as "Jeff" in the book—responded that Thompson is prone to distortion, projection, and exaggerations and that his charges are

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not credible.)

In one breath Thompson insists that all of these topics come up in *The Price of Achievement* for a reason. "There's nothing intentional in there that isn't related to either my own personal evolution sexually or the policy issues that they got wrapped up in," he says. In the next breath he admits that he knew his claims about Nitze "would titillate" and says he hopes to write another volume that is "much more shocking."

Are Thompson's more outrageous allegations reliable? His friends are divided. Wieseltier would be "very, very surprised to learn that there's a big lie at the heart of anything in this book. In fact, I know Scott—he's pathologically truthful." Others give a different view of Thompson's personality, gingerly describing him as a man who'll say something controversial just for the attention—while quite possibly believing it. Nolan says he's "a brilliant and tragic figure" whose "continuous quest for a stable identity is entirely laudable" but whose habit of seeking the spotlight is "lamentable."

But perhaps what's most interesting about all this is that Thompson still has a position to lose. He came out almost a decade ago—before he was reappointed and reconfirmed to the U.S. Institute for Peace's board in 1988, and the issue of his sexual orientation proved—as he tells it—to be as much help as hindrance. That should not come as a total surprise, according to Nolan, who points out that even during the early years of the Reagan administration, there were "zillions" of influential gays among the eager revolutionaries.

"They all knew and acknowledged one another," she says, "but they didn't talk about being gay. They maintained a big divide between their professional lives and their personal lives." The same was true for straight people, she insists.

But when Thompson came out, he came out with a bang. In quest of a relationship, he took out a personal ad in a District of Columbia gay newspaper and took a man who answered his ad to White

House functions, where he introduced him as his lover. As Thompson tells it, former Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Colin Powell didn't bat an eye—but a prominent gay friend of the Reagans' snubbed them both. "He wasn't going to waste time with anyone so stupid as to be open about his homosexuality," Thompson writes, "because such a person would have no staying power in the federal city."

Thompson is perfectly aware of the risks he's taking by publishing his memoir. Friends have told him he "shouldn't even think about going back into government." But he says, "You have to trade that off against whatever you gain. If you like notoriety, fine; you gain something on that. And my students will talk about it. They won't be scandalized—they'll be amused."

His idea, he says, was to "forward the political notion that we should have prominent role models, that more people should come out, that those who are out should come out further, and that those who are out further should politely

Thompson's idea was that "more people should come out and that those who are out should politely but firmly tell straight friends that we're different."

but firmly tell their straight friends that we're different—in the way we react and in our interests."

For now, Thompson is working the coming presidential race from two sides. "I'm sending in stuff to the Bob Dole campaign," he says, and at the same time he is promising Powell that he'll try to drum up support among lesbians and gay men should

Powell run.

Who knows? With a Republican presidential victory in 1996, Thompson might hope at long last to win the place he's always wanted—a State Department policy-planning position that would suit his talents like no other. As a whistle-blowing gay gadfly in a conservative administration, his role would more than ever be fraught with contradictions. But then, Thompson has a history of being able to juggle conflict. As Wieseltier puts it: "Scott is one of the great contradiction artists of all time." ●