

How Homosexuals Were Barred from Federal Employment by the Eisenhower Government in the 1950s

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Abstract. Amid the Cold War hysteria of the 1950s, the U.S. government also pursued a separate purge known as the “Lavender Scare,” which ousted lesbians and gay men from federal employment. The official justification was national security and the fears of potential blackmail, but the real reason, as this article suggests, lay deeper: legacy homophobia thrived on a postwar era of heightened prudery. By way of a rhetorical analysis of documents' figurative language, this article first unpacks the euphemizing code of a 1951 Congressional Report to reveal, via a preexisting medicalization of homosexuality and codification of bias to bureaucratic rule, a narrative of homosexuals as inherently unstable “sexual perverts”. The paper then deconstructs the gut-level rhetoric of politicians like Senator Miller, revealing his reliance on particular types of McCarthyism as a strategy to weaponize moral panic and to conflate the homosexual threat with the communist threat. The paper argues that the logic of the Lavender Scare was circular, with state-sponsored homophobia producing the very conditions of vulnerability it purported to defend against. Ultimately, the study exposes the harm evoked by these sensations, which not only ruined innumerable lives, but paradoxically served to incite the formation of some of the first homophile rights organizations, demonstrating the staggering ease with which bigotry may be legalized under the rhetoric of national security.

Keywords: Lavender Scare; Homophobia; Cold War; Executive Order 10450; National Security Rhetoric.

1. Introduction

Presently, the United States is one of the spaces where the LGBTQ+ movement thrives; but in the 1950s, homosexuals also faced discrimination in the U.S.. This persecution was described as the “Lavender Scare,” more aptly a moral panic running parallel to the Cold War's Red Scare when people feared those who deviated from social norms [1, 2].

This was a time when people were afraid of those who didn't conform to the norm. This anxiety shaped the post-World War II American landscape, in which a manic drive toward social conformity held sway. Idealized in the configuration of suburban life and a rigid priority placed on the nuclear family, this craving for a consistent “American way of life” took on a national security component. Conformity was itself linked with patriotism, and any behavior that did not conform to the norms—whether social, political, or sexual—could be suspect as a potential expression of weakness, subversion, and lack of loyalty [3]. And in this fear-soaked atmosphere, where difference all too often got equated with danger, we can see why the persecution of gays gained such potent institutional purchase.

Barred from federal employment by the Eisenhower Government through its federal Security Program, the official justification was the fear of possible espionage activities on the part of homosexuals [4]. However, a critical rhetoric analysis of the era reveals that the purge was motivated by more than security concerns; it was fueled by plain old homophobia. While foundational works like David K. Johnson's *The Lavender Scare* [1] have masterfully chronicled the actions the federal government took, and scholars such as Naoko Shibusawa [2] have analyzed the broader antigay policies of the Cold War, a gap remains in understanding the specific rhetorical strategies employed during the 1950s peak. Building on these important works and addressing this gap in the literature,

this paper will center on the Eisenhower government and the Security Program to provide a more granular examination of the language used to justify this discrimination.

To demonstrate how homophobic ideology, rather than security pragmatism, fueled these policies, this paper will first analyze the sanitized, institutional language of a 1951 congressional report. It will then examine the visceral, individual rhetoric from a congressional hearing to reveal the two faces of this discriminatory campaign: one of bureaucratic justification and one of overt prejudice. Through this dual analysis, the homophobic reasons and actions behind the purge will be clearly shown.

2. The Institutionalization of Fear: Analyzing the 1951 Interim Report

The initial source for this analysis is an Interim Report submitted to the Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments, in accordance with S. Res. 280 (81st Congress) [5]. The investigation itself, which is reported here, was supposed to establish the degree to which homosexual individuals were employed in the federal government; the reasons why such employment was considered improper, if indeed it was; and the adequacy or inadequacy of the existing measures to determine and deal with this problem. An analysis of the report shows how it gradually set about constructing a rationale for discrimination-in fact, for prevailing already existing societal prejudice, in the sanitized, impersonal idiom of bureaucratic policy.

This reasoning didn't emerge in a vacuum; instead, it was built upon decades of prior bias that was legitimized by medical science. By the early 20th century, the medical and psychiatric establishment had increasingly been redefining homosexuality not as an immoral act but as a form of psychopathology, a developmental disorder [6]. This transition from a moral to pseudo-science condemnation was potent, attaching the appearance of objectivity onto deeply held prejudices. To be sure the Interim Report had a readymade intellectual armature to which to turn in order to present its discriminatory conclusions as based upon accepted, though defective, medical and scientific knowledge.

Initially, the report characterized homosexuality as both a criminal act and a deviation from societal norms. It asserted that individuals identified as homosexuals were regarded as sexual deviants, noting that "Overt acts of sex perversion, including acts of homosexuality, constitute a crime under our Federal, State, and municipal statutes, and persons who commit such acts are law violators" [7]. Furthermore, the report indicated that homosexuals could not always be readily recognized, as gay men might present with masculine traits while lesbians might exhibit feminine characteristics. By doing so, it presented homosexuality as a concealed threat within government.

Building on this foundation of perversion and criminality, the report then argued that homosexuals were inherent security risks. It was believed that homosexuals were vulnerable to blackmail and espionage. The report's core assertion rested on a pathologizing stereotype, which warrants a closer analysis: "The lack of emotional stability which is found in most sex perverts and the weakness of their moral fiber, makes them susceptible to the blandishments of the foreign espionage agent". The words 'lack of emotional stability' had searing power in the chill of the Cold War. Emotion, during a time when stoic, masculine resolution was regarded as the nation's best defense against communist incursion, was at best a sign of weakness and at worst a sign of unreliability. Homosexual (and malware-prone) "It's an excellent early intelligence estimate about people who may be unstable enough (constitutionally, that is) to be in government service...." By branding homosexuals as constitutionally unstable, the report shows them as unequal to the stresses of government service. In like manner, 'weakness of their moral fiber' would conjure up an image of innate character lackingness. It implied that homosexuality was not just a private act but a public sign of bad character and an unwillingness to follow the nation's prevailing moral codes. This supposed moral weakness rendered them, in the report's reasoning, particularly susceptible to the trickery of enemy agents.

The language of the Interim Report, presented as an objective security assessment, thus shows its homophobic bias. By describing homosexuals as criminal, morally weak, and emotionally unstable,

the report gave the necessary bureaucratic justification for policies like Executive Order 10450, which was passed in 1953 to remove homosexuals from government positions [8]. Fueled by these findings, the report also called for government officials to be responsible for “exercising a high degree of diligence in the handling of the problem of sex perversion,” effectively charging the state with the duty to enforce discrimination. The document used formal investigation to legitimize discrimination and transform prejudice into policy.

3. The Rhetoric of Hate: Senator Miller and the Politics of Moral Panic

The Interim Report gave the sanitized, institutional justification for the purge. The public rhetoric of political figures like Congressman Arthur L. Miller [9], however, is a stark example of the deep-seated and institutionalized discrimination actively fueling these policies. Throughout his address, he uses inflammatory and dehumanizing language, describing homosexuality as “fetid, stinking flesh,” and homosexuals as pathological criminals, just as “kleptomaniacs” or “pyromaniacs,” thus suggesting their behavior is both criminal and immoral. This indeed goes beyond bureaucratic classification; homosexuals are framed as a moral abhorrence.

Miller then methodically inflamed public anxieties. He maintains fear and prejudice by arguing that gays and lesbians present a security threat because “they can be blackmailed,” asking, “I sometimes wonder the degree to which a lot of these [homosexuals] who are able to be blackmailed have had influence in [how] foreign policy is created. How many were in sensitive positions and could be blackmailed). What’s more, Miller’s vision of homosexual sex is seedy, sensationalistic and prurient, referring to it as “sex orgies” and depicting gay men as frequenting establishments of ill repute: “There is a restaurant downtown that you will find male prostitutes. They bring business for other male guests” [9]. Those images were not simply designed to outrage and reconfirm prejudices about the moral pollutions of homosexuality; they were designed to whip up a full-blown moral panic, one which depicted the private lives of gay people as undermining public morality and order.

Perhaps the most potent element of Miller's rhetoric was his fusion of this moral panic with the era's primary political anxiety: communism. By linking homosexuality to communism and espionage, he amplifies the perceived threat, suggesting that foreign powers could manipulate homosexuals: “It is a known fact that homosexuality goes back to the Orientals, long before the time of Confucius; that the Russians are strong believers in homosexuality, and that those same people can get into the State Department and get somebody in their embrace, and once they are in their embrace, fearing blackmail, will make them go to any extent”. This unfounded assertion was politically powerful, as it merged the two great fears of the era into a single, terrifying internal enemy.

This rhetorical method of conjoining domestic social “deviance” with external political menace was a trademark of McCarthyism, most famously epitomized by its eponymous figurehead, Senator Joseph McCarthy [10]. Miller’s speech makes use of several classic McCarthy-like tricks. The first is deploying factually false claims pretending that they are known facts to generate an air of certainty and terror. Second is the guilt-by-association tactic in which homosexuality is not only wrong in and of itself but is rendered sinister by its supposed association with foreign adversaries. This approach had two sets of effects: it oriented hatred on the enemy in question, and it magnified the threat of that external enemy, justifying drastic measures against two objects at once. In following this playbook, Miller was not merely giving vent to personal bias; he was following a long, well-honed political strategy of imposing uniformity in the face of a powerful internal threat that exists only in the politics of those who see all threats real and political as necessarily internal.

His conclusion underscores the institutionalization of discrimination, framing it as a matter of both national security and public morality: “It is indeed a privilege and certainly not a right to work for the Government... This sacred obligation to the taxpayer implies the summary removal of any employee who does not measure up to these standards”. Miller’s speech thus exemplifies how raw prejudice was translated into a public policy imperative. Through his attitude, we can clearly see the moral and

political difficulties homosexuality faced at that time, where dehumanizing rhetoric transformed a group of citizens into a national threat justifying their wholesale exclusion from public service.

4. Conclusion

The 1950s-based Lavender Scare resulted in homosexual staff being fired from federal employment under Eisenhower. This discrimination was then codified in the Security Program and Executive Order 10450 against homosexuals as security risks subject to blackmail. This official justification was, as this article has revealed, sustained by a two-barrelled rhetorical attack. Reports such as the Interim Report to the Committee on Expenditures lent a fig leaf of bureaucratic propriety to the proceedings, and the hysterical rhetoric of persons such as Senator Miller further characterised homosexuals as emotionally inadequate and morally deficient. The various purges wrecked countless lives and careers, further isolating the LGBTQ+ community.

The campaign's profoundly destructive efficacy was based on what historian Naoko Shibusawa describes as a circular reasoning: the notion that homophobia rendered homosexuals susceptible to blackmail, while concurrently, the prevailing policies of heightened homophobia ostensibly exacerbated their vulnerability to such exploitation. This paper's analysis confirms this circularity, showing how the state manufactured its own justification for discrimination. Though legal and social conditions for homosexuals have improved, this period of history offers a critical lesson. We need to learn from this period of history, as it demonstrates how easily prejudice can be weaponized with the language of national security. In that sense, the Lavender Scare—though a disaster for all the lives it destroyed—paradoxically served to pave the way for the contemporary gay rights movement. Organizations like the Mattachine Society, established in 1950, and the Daughters of Bilitis, founded in 1955, emerged as a direct response to this era of intense persecution. These early "homophile" groups offered support for those affected and helped to initiate the protracted struggle for civil rights, to confront a state sponsored discrimination of which the present paper has offered one account. The goal of this article, therefore, is to shed light on this past injustice to better inform the continued struggle for gay rights and the protection of all marginalized groups.

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