

## The Legacy of the Lavender Scare

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While I'm familiar with the Stonewall Riots, and some of the other events and struggles over the decades of my life that the LGBTQ+ community has endured, I was not, before now, familiar with the Lavender Scare of the mid-twentieth century. It occurred before my birth and was not often written about in media I've been familiar with. In reading about it, it has become clear that the Lavender Scare has had lasting effects, which the LGBTQ+ community and society at large have been dealing with to varying degrees in the decades since, right up to and including today.

While it may have been before my time, my parents and their generation grew up in the culture that brought about and lived through the Lavender Scare, and my grandparents and their generation would have been full voting-age adults subject to the societal attitudes toward homosexuality in any and all of its permutations. I mention this because there is a clear divide between the attitudes of these earlier generations and those of my and later generations, who have had a much more accepting attitude toward homosexuality. But seeing how the discrimination was institutionalized in such a public way when our parents and grandparents were younger, helps me understand why some of the anti-homosexual attitudes of older generations have been held so strongly. It's simply the way they were brought up to think about how the world works, what's right and what's wrong. This is a hard attitude to shake, even without government institutionalization and normalization of discrimination.

Occurring roughly from the WWII era through the sixties (and arguably beyond), peaking in the early fifties, with the rise of Senator Joe McCarthy's congressional committees looking into government and societal deviance and supposed security threats, when "the attitudes toward homosexuality were overwhelmingly negative and the psychiatric community regarded homosexuality as a mental disorder, gay men and lesbians were considered susceptible to blackmail, thus constituting a security risk. U.S. government officials assumed that communists [who were the number one concern – bogeymen if you will] would blackmail homosexual employees of the federal government to provide them classified information rather than risk exposure." (Ayyar, Raj (January 1, 2004). "Historian David K. Johnson: Exposes the U.S. Government's Anti-Gay Crusades." *Gay Today*).

The Lavender Scare essentially normalized the persecution of homosexuals through bureaucratic institutionalization of homophobia, where the government worked to identify homosexual employees (sometimes correctly, oftentimes not) in a panic that they were security risks. At least this was the initial reason given. The language of various laws and procedures for this work, was left intentionally vague to include general sexual deviancy, and non-traditional lifestyles in general, leading to a lot of unfounded accusations and many people losing their livelihoods, or living in fear of such a fate befalling them.

This was highly tied to the effort to oust communists, the prime perceived threat at the time, and the two conditions, being a communist and being a homosexual were inextricably linked via sometimes nothing more than innuendo.

That's all understandable. What brings the legacy into dangerous territory today is the fact that the Lavender scare was part of McCarthyism, and McCarthy hired Roy Cohn to be the Chief Counsel to McCarthy's congressional committee charged with rooting out communism, homosexuality, and other perceived threats. We should pay attention to this fact since Roy Cohn is a lawyer who famously went on to be a chief mentor to our new President-Elect, Donald Trump. Meaning he still has influence today. Trump and his counselors have had no problem scapegoating various groups for the country's ills, just as McCarthy did. His 1950s-based attitudes and his propensity to threaten any people he doesn't like makes me think the danger of this type of discrimination growing in an official or unofficial way is still very real more than a half-century later if it ever truly went away.

Together, McCarthy and Cohn were responsible for the firing of scores of gay men and women from government employment, and strong-armed many opponents into silence using rumors of their homosexuality. Given the rise on the political right to more and more unswerving attitudes that promote "Trad Wife" and other cultural throwbacks to earlier, repressive times and norms, I'm a bit worried that this slippery slope could undo decades of progress our society has made with regards to equality for those in the LGBTQ+ community.

In 1953, President Eisenhower signed an order that set security standards for federal employment and barred homosexuals from working in the federal government. Not only did the victims lose their jobs, but also they were forced out of the closet and thrust into the public eye as lesbian or gay. If friends or family even thought a person might be homosexual, they could also be targeted. This sort of official discrimination creates a culture of secrecy, privacy, and fear as the threats to people's livelihoods are real.

Even McCarthy and Cohn were not immune to accusations of being homosexual, that's how deep the paranoia in society went. Accusations and insinuations were easy to make, and hard to shake. Many low-level government clerks, who had no access to state secrets that needed protecting, were targeted, exposing the lie that the effort to root out homosexuality in the government, the military and other aspects of American life had anything to do with protecting the country. It was simply a moral witch-hunt.

It wasn't until the late 1990s when President Clinton eased some of the discriminatory practices, instituting a "don't ask, don't tell," policy for military members. And it wasn't until the 2010s when President Obama finally rescinded President Eisenhower's 1953 order. That's how long the Lavender Scare had a strong and *official* effect on American Society.

Leaders, media people, and especially, teachers, who do not want to see us return to these scary earlier attitudes and times, need to be diligent about making our worlds be safe spaces for all people, especially LGBTQ+ members. As a teacher, I will make sure everyone knows they are welcome, respected, capable, and equal to any other member of my class. It is only in this way, where we recognize that people have various, very normal, and non-problematic statuses to their sexuality and gender identity that we can create a culture of acceptance, and one where people are not afraid of being outed, or teased, or fired, or failed in a classroom, or be subject to any other discriminatory practice. In this way the power of bigots to create something like the Lavender Scare can never happen again. All sexualities and gender identities would become normalized. Fearing members of this community would not be normalized. There's nothing to fear from LGBTQ+ people there can be no scare. This is what I, other teachers and other leaders need to get across.