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The Lavender Scare:
How Fear and Prejudice Impacted a Nation in Crisis

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On April 27th, 1953, United States President Dwight D. Eisenhower put into place Executive Order 10450.¹ The purpose of the policy was to purge the federal government of anybody who did not fit the ideals of American morality during its era. While the document refrained from explicitly naming homosexuals as one of its targets, it did exclude anyone with “sexual perversion,” which was a euphemism for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) people at that time. The order was a response to the growing fears of communism within the United States as a result of the Cold War between America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In 1953, Senator Joseph McCarthy had already set into motion the witch hunt for Communist infiltration in the United States government, a movement which would come to be christened the Red Scare. Executive Order 10450 is a signifier of a parallel movement—the Lavender Scare. This term refers to the panic driven response to the “threat” of homosexuals in the federal government and the perceived danger they presented to the American

¹ Executive Order 10450. (1953) *Security requirements for Government employment*. P. 936. 18 Employment of homosexuals and other sex perverts in government ; interim report submitted to the Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments by its Subcommittee on Investigations (Washington D.C. 1950.) 81st Congress, 2d session. Senate document; no. 241, <https://searchworks.stanford>.

way of life. While the Lavender Scare is less commonly known than the Red Scare in public knowledge of the Cold War, it is nonetheless important. In fact, its relative obscurity is indicative of the forced secrecy placed upon LGBTQ+ individuals during this and many other eras. The most significant subjects to discuss in order to understand the Lavender Scare are the origins of the Scare, the policies that placed fear of LGBTQ+ individuals into legislation, the connection to social structure within America, and the overall impact on the LGBTQ+ and straight communities.

Prior to the Cold War, there was a prevailing ideology that homosexuals experienced same sex attraction as a result of having a soul of the opposite gender; in essence, heterosexuality was the norm and any deviation from that was the result of an abnormality in gender.² This is interesting in a modern context because of the current debate of the legitimacy of transgender individuals. Before the Lavender Scare, all “true” homosexuals were believed to be what a current audience could consider transgender. The idea of the “true” homosexual also shifted during the Lavender Scare. The reigning ideology of the early 20th century was that only stereotypical homosexuals, i.e. effeminate gay men or masculine lesbians, were actually homosexuals. This was particularly significant for the view of feminine lesbians. Probably due to the misogyny of the time, feminine lesbians, also called femmes, were seen as naive straight women who were corrupted by the “real”, or masculine, lesbians. The Lavender Scare shifted this viewpoint and made femmes into an insidious and undetectable threat to America’s security and social structure. Furthermore, homosexuals have historically been used as scapegoats. When the fabric of society is perceived as being threatened, such as with communism, society has the

² Robert J. Corber, *Cold War Femme: Lesbianism, National Identity, and Hollywood Cinema*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

tendency of blaming the “others.” This is because it is easy for officials to divert anger and fear from being abstract and focus it on a physical target. For historical evidence, one can consider the events and repercussions of the Holocaust. Homosexuals, along with other groups that deviated from “the norm,” such as the disabled, the Roma, or, most notably, the Jewish people. In 1937, Heinrich Himmler, a Nazi leader, gave a speech on the “Question of Homosexuality” to senior military leaders³. In this speech, Himmler talked of the dangers of the “abnormal life” of the homosexual. Himmler argued that homosexuals endangered the entire society of Germany, and consequently were a threat that needed to be addressed. The Lavender Scare was an example of prejudice against LGBTQ+ culture, which is detrimental on an individual, community, and societal level. While it would be insensitive to compare this to the scale of atrocities which occurred during the Holocaust, it is important to look at the actions taken less than ten years after the end of the Holocaust, such as Executive Order 10450 within this context. After the end of World War 2, some homosexuals were not freed and instead were forced to serve out a sentence for the crime of homosexuality.⁴ Homosexuality was still a crime in Germany, even without the Nazi party in power. Consequently, homosexuals lived through the atrocities of the Holocaust and were then made to sacrifice even more of their lives in prison for the perceived crime of loving the same sex. Therefore, the homophobic practices during the Lavender Scare were occurring around the same time that homosexuals were still imprisoned from the Holocaust. This provides evidence for the vastly homophobic global opinion of LGBTQ+ individuals that allowed for them to be an easy target for scapegoating.

³ Heinrich Himmler, “Question of Homosexuality,” (Speech, February 18, 1937. Homosexuals and the Holocaust, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/himmler-speech-on-the-ldquo-question-of-homosexuality-rdquo>)

⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Aftermath,”ushmm.org, accessed April 2020, <https://www.ushmm.org/exhibition/persecution-of-homosexuals/chapter12.php>.

The Lavender Scare was marked by the governmental and cultural policies enacted during the Cold War. These policies legitimized the moral beliefs of the time by putting them into official writing. Persecution of LGBTQ+ individuals in the United States was not started during the Cold War, and neither was the use of policy to provide legitimacy to this discrimination. Anti-sodomy laws have traditionally been used to provide a legal case for banning homosexual relations. The first anti-sodomy laws in America were implemented in the Jamestown colony in the 1600s and resulted in execution for those convicted. Similar laws which, either explicitly or implicitly, prohibit homosexuality were carried on through the Lavender Scare and even in more modern times.⁵ Since its formation, America has seen a long and arduous battle on the political and social stage between acceptance and discrimination for LGBTQ+ citizens. The importance of the Lavender Scare on this particular issue was that it changed the way homosexuals were viewed and it made the “homosexual issue” an issue of national security. The origin of the Lavender Scare can be traced back to the Sex Perversion Elimination Act of 1947⁶, in which police began targeting gay individuals who frequented public parks. This was the start of an era of increased scrutiny and fear against homosexuality, which came to a peak with Executive Order 10450 in 1953. By targeting these individuals, officials were further normalizing the legislation of personal identities. Senator Joseph McCarthy, known for his role in utilizing panic to accuse many in the United States government and military of communist ties, was also a catalyst for the Lavender Scare. In 1952, Senator McCarthy gave a

⁵ Doe v. Commonwealth’s Atty. for City of Richmond. (1975) 403 F. Supp. 1199, <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/403/1199/1568467/>.

⁶ James Gleason, “LGBT History: The Lavender Scare,” nglcc.org, National LGBT Chamber of Commerce, Published October 3 2017, <https://www.nglcc.org/blog/lgbt-history-lavender-scare>.

speech on the topic of homosexuals in the United States State Department.⁷ He stated, in reference to the LGBTQ+ community, that “[s]ome of them have that unusual affliction because of no fault of their own – most, of course, because they are morally weak.” This shows the position of many officials during that time. If homosexuality was a moral issue, then there was an excuse for them to be discriminated against. If they were morally corrupt, they could corrupt others or be a threat to the moral fabric of America. McCarthy concludes his speech by stating, “[w]e’re not disturbed about them because of their morals, but because they are dangerous to this country.” This statement demonstrates the spin that McCarthy, Himmler, and other officials were using to justify their various narratives. Rather than bluntly expressing the anger and need for a scapegoat that underlined the motives behind the policies, the officials presented it as a necessary evil. They say they do not hate homosexuals; discriminating against them is simply the only way to keep their moral abnormality from impacting society.

The actions of these officials coincided with cultural policies at the time. For instance, the entertainment industry prohibited depictions of perceived moral corruption, including homosexual representation.⁸ However, this did not prevent subversive homosexual undertones that promoted the societal views of the time. In Robert J. Corber’s book, *Cold War Femme* (2011), Corber dives into the connection between societal perception of the LGBTQ+ community and media representation at the time. For instance, Corber argues that the 1950 film *All about Eve* includes lesbian subtext that parallels and promotes the homophobic themes of the time.⁹ In this film, the character Eve is positioned as queer. Her character is also fiercely

⁷ Joe McCarthy, “Homosexuals in State Department,” (Speech, Wheeling, WV, USA, February 9, 1952, Marquette University, https://www.marquette.edu/library/archives/DC/JRM/JRM_1952_Wheeling_excpt.pdf).

⁸ Michael Brooke, “The Hayes Code,” screenonline.org.uk, BFI Screenonline, accessed April 2020, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/592022/>.

⁹ Joseph L. Mankiewicz., dir. *All About Eve*, 1950, 20th Century Fox.

ambitious, sexual, and dishonest. This is congruent with the moral positioning of the time. LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly lesbians, were seen as morally abnormal, which was expanded into being morally corrupt in all areas. With the policy limiting homosexual representation in media, representation was limited to simply hinting at homosexuality. This meant that film makers relied on the moral perception of the time period to create characters that were basically stereotypical caricatures of LGBTQ+ individuals. Gay men were flamboyant and effeminate, lesbians were jealous, vindictive, and seduced straight women. Homosexuals in general were seen as capable of anything due to a lack of moral integrity. The importance of this policy is that it provided an echo chamber of ideas. The film depictions were based on public perception, which was perpetuated by governmental policy, which then encouraged the film industry. It was a self-perpetuating cycle which served to further the ideals that fueled the Lavender Scare.

The connection between the Lavender Scare and society was influenced by policies, but it is important to delve into the societal and cultural impact beyond the impact of legislation. Second-wave feminism was brewing and increased feminist ideals, along with the backlash against them, were significant during the Lavender Scare. The Cold War began directly after World War II, which also was the catalyst for more women in the workplace. As a large population of men left America to fight in the war, women took over their jobs to keep the economy going and to support the war from the home front. Even after the men returned, the cultural shift of women in the workforce remained at some level. An increased number of women were going to college, seeking employment, or both. At the same time, however, the Cold War was acting as a war of morals between Russia and America.¹⁰ This resulted in a

¹⁰ Nikita Khrushchev and Richard Nixon, "The Two Worlds: A Day-Long Debate," in *The Kitchen Debate and Cold War Consumer Politics* (Boston: Bedford St. Martin's, 2014), 43-51.

pushback towards traditional American values, specifically the nuclear family ideal- a joyful wife who took care of the home and reared 2.5 children while her hardworking husband provided for the family and came home in time for the dinner that was prepared by his doting wife. If women were working, this subverted the nuclear family. In 1955, Illinois Governor Adlai E. Stevenson gave a speech to the graduating class of Smith College, a prestigious women's university.¹¹ Stevenson emphasized the importance of the woman's role at home, both to retain the social norms and to "keep [your husband] Western, to keep him truly purposeful, to keep him whole." In this case, the audience is extremely significant. Stevenson was speaking to women who had graduated college and presumably were seeking employment. Instead of applauding their achievements, Stevenson spoke of their place in the home and placed the responsibility of keeping men, and by extension America, Western. This shows the emphasis placed on women's traditional role at home as a way to win the war of morals during the Cold War. This is relevant to the Lavender Scare because of Executive Order 10450 and the understanding of homosexuality at the time. Homosexuals were barred from federal employment, and homosexuality is hard to prove or disprove. Furthermore, many people accused of homosexuality resigned without a fight for fear of a negative impact on their personal life. Additionally, government jobs attracted women who were looking for careers because of the potential for promotion. All of these factors created an environment where men who were unhappy with or threatened by a female boss or coworker could report them for homosexuality with a high possibility of the woman being removed from the job. The belief that homosexuality was a result of a moral and social abnormality was also a factor in the removal of women in the federal

¹¹ Adlai E. Stevenson, "A Purpose for Modern Women," Speech given at Smith College, Massachusetts, 1955, https://wnorton.com/college/history/archive/resources/documents/ch32_04.htm.

government. If homosexuals were abnormal in all manners and women in the workforce were an abnormality, then working women were at risk of being considered lesbians. In a time where homosexuality carried significant personal and professional retribution, the threat of the accusation was enough to keep women from seeking employment in the government. This thereby strengthened the effect of Lavender Scare policy.

The Lavender Scare also changed the perception of gayness in America. Prior to the Cold War, homosexuality was not accepted, but was something of a peculiar secret. The intensity and scope of the Lavender Scare transformed the perception of homosexuality into something insidious. A major part of that is because of the nature of the Cold War itself. The moral side of the Cold War meant that any threat to societal expectations was a threat to national security. It was believed at the time that homosexuals were inherently overly sexualized and therefore were more susceptible to seduction from communist spies. Homosexuals were also considered to be more vulnerable to conversion to communism because they were seen as morally weak, and therefore more easily corrupted. And due to the homophobic culture and policies at the time, LGBTQ+ individuals had reasons for which they could be blackmailed by communists. This final reasoning given for why homosexuals were considered a security threat is particularly interesting because it presents a paradox. If homosexuals were more likely to be blackmailed because of the personal and professional retributions of Lavender Scare era policies and ideals, but policies kept being enacted that perpetuated these retributions, then homosexuals would face greater consequences that could be exploited by blackmail. This paradox exemplifies the illogicality produced by the intense panic and fear of the Cold War era.

The impact of the Lavender Scare could be seen in both the LGBTQ+ and straight communities. Queer issues have traditionally been a thing of secrecy. It can be difficult to find

research and discussion of LGBTQ+ topics. This is due to the fact that many LGBTQ+ people remained highly secretive because of the implications being outed could have on their career, personal life, or their physical safety. This silencing was put into policy by legislation such as Executive Order 10450 and the 1947 Sex Perversion Elimination Act. These laws did not serve to eradicate queerness. Instead, they fostered a sense of fear, secrecy, and shame that quieted the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, during this time period, gay representation was banned from film and other forms of entertainment which served to further suppress queer representation. The negative perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community, which were promoted by the Lavender Scare, encouraged internalized homophobia. This meant LGBTQ+ individuals who hated or feared homosexuality or the societal consequences from it suffered. The increase in panic from the fear of homosexuality also increased the potential for physical attacks towards gay people.

Beyond increasing fear and anger towards homosexuals in the straight community, the Lavender Scare also influenced the straight community's understanding of queerness. The Lavender Scare shifted the understanding of homosexuality from a secret, mostly harmless group of people into something dangerous and unknown. Suddenly, homosexuality was pushed into public view in a time of intense uncertainty and danger. It is not surprising that the straight community would have emotional misunderstandings towards homosexuals. These misgivings can be seen by people such as author Jess Stearn, who carried Lavender Scare ideals into his 1964 book, *The Grapevine: A Report on the Secret Life of the Lesbian*.¹² In this text, Stearn compares lesbians to a communist invasion. His intent in this comparison was to say that lesbians, particularly femmes, were an undetectable threat because they did not always physically match the stereotype of the butch lesbian. Therefore, these lesbians could infiltrate the

¹² Jess Stearn, *The Grapevine: A Report on the Secret Life of the Lesbian* (New York: Macfadden Bartell, 1965).

good American nuclear family and corrupt the wife into lesbianism, thereby threatening the morality of the husband and leaving the children without a caregiver. Of course, in this theory, Stearn relies on the misogynistic adage of the naive, corruptible woman who must be protected by her husband, lest she be tempted by the morally corrupt. Furthermore, this comparison is possibly the most blatant example of the existence of the Lavender Scare. It is not nuanced, nor a suggestion of a connection between the communist threat and homosexuality. It is a direct comparison. In Stearn's mind, and in the minds of many in the Cold War era, homosexuals were connected to communism. Furthermore, not only were homosexuals seen as being communist sympathizers, there was also the connotation of the spread of homosexuality in congruence to the spread of communism. While it is currently believed in modern American society that homosexuality is not contagious, that was not as widely believed when Stearn and other heterosexual people of the mid 1900s were hypothesizing about the LGBTQ+ community. If homosexuality was something that could be spread, then it was something that needed to be contained, thereby validating the policies and fear during the Lavender Scare. The blending of an emotional response, such as fear, with official policy that reiterated that emotional response resulted in a strong, reinforced ideology that could be passed down to future generations. Beyond the direct connection to the LGBTQ+ community, the Lavender Scare also reinforced traditional gender roles through fear of being considered LGBTQ+. Consequently, the Lavender Scare had the impact of hindering the growth of feminism and women in the workplace. Essentially, the Lavender Scare's impact spread far beyond the specific restrictions placed in policy.

The Lavender Scare is an example of the ever-changing nature of the perception of queer identity in society, as well as the changing presence of feminism and gender dynamics within the political sphere. The fear of the connection between communism and homosexuality impacted

legislation, entertainment, employment, and personal identity. The long term impact of the Lavender Scare also spans across a plethora of topics. The legitimization of the femme lesbian during the Lavender Scare was vastly negative, with increased fear of the discreet lesbian and the negative impact on women's ability to deviate from the traditional homemaker role. However, in present times, the normalization of queer people who do not fit traditional queer stereotypes, specifically in terms of gender expression, resulted in a broader acceptance. The interference that the Lavender Scare had on women's rights presumably prevented the feminist movement from achieving wider acceptance for women in the workforce during the Cold War era. On the individual level, moving homosexuality onto the public stage and the policies that legitimized homophobia impacted the ability for LGBTQ+ people to be their authentic selves. The Lavender Scare has been woven into the fabric of United State history, albeit a dark one. However, it needs to be researched and understood in order to make better policies moving forward. In order to atone in some part for the prejudices of the past, lessons must be learned and improvements must be made.

About the author

Erin Owens is a senior at Georgia Southern and is majoring in International Studies and French. She has a personal conviction for international relations, particularly concerning Eastern European-American relations and social issues such as LGBTQ+ history. She has worked for political campaigns and has achieved state and national awards for speaking through the GHSA State Literary Championship and Future Business Leaders of America.

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