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Purge of the Perverts: The Lavender Scare and the Present Day

When we apply for a job, we expect our experience, skills, and perhaps overall enthusiasm to be what determines whether or not we get the job, and whether or not we get to stay at the job. However, if we take a look at our country's history, that has not always been the case. This is evident through the Lavender Scare. The Lavender Scare was a federal government policy designed in the 1950s to deprive LGBT+ citizens of jobs and opportunities, that subsequently bled into the mindset of society and lead to LGBT+ citizens being aggressively discriminated against from then until even today.

Many people pinpoint Executive Order 10450 as the start of the Lavender Scare. Signed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in April 1953, it claims that in the interest of national security, all government employees must be of excellent character. This meant that they must have unshakeable loyalty to the United States government, and refrain from dishonest and immoral conduct like drug addictions and sexual perversions. In addition, it puts the heads of the departments in charge of maintaining the character of their employees ("Executive Order 10450"). While this certainly empowered the politicians behind the Lavender Scare to continue their work, it would be too simple to solely blame the executive order for the entirety of the Lavender Scare. Awareness of homosexuality came into sharp prominence when Professor Alfred Kinsey of Indiana University published the infamous Kinsey Reports, which focused particularly on homosexuality. Half of his subjects indeed reported having either homosexual thoughts or incidents, but Kinsey was reporting on homosexual behavior rather than identity. The Kinsey Reports were released in 1948 (Eaklor 88). Perhaps it is no coincidence then that between

1947 and 1950 alone, 4,954 men and women got dismissed from their jobs as federal civil servants for being risks to national security (Faderman 146).

The situation intensifies further because of Senator Joseph McCarthy, the mastermind behind the communist witch hunts of the 1950s, who brings the issue of homosexual government employees to Congress. When giving a speech to the Senate in February 1950, McCarthy in particular underlined two cases in which communism also involved homosexual behaviors (Charles 265). With anticommunist sentiment becoming an overwhelming belief of the American people, McCarthy, with his speech, puts homosexuality in that same category of undesirable lifestyles (Eaklor 87). Further reiterating the alleged connection between communism and homosexuality, the State Department admitted a week later that ninety-one homosexuals had been fired from the department, along with two hundred communists. While McCarthy is the first major politician who heightens the frenzy behind the Lavender Scare, it is Republican Senators Styles Bridges, Clyde Hoey, and Kenneth Wherry who continue his efforts. The three of them push for a Senate investigation of “sexual perverts” working within the federal government, and by June 1950, the three of them establish a committee with both Republicans and Democrats to address the matter. Now emboldened, the politicians fire nearly six thousand government employees by November 1950. Calling it the “purge of the perverts,” State Department security officials in particular bragged that they were firing an average of one LGBT+ person per day (*The Lavender Scare* 112).

Only worsening the matter was the press, who amplified pre-existing anxiety and hysteria around the issue with its vague coverage. Instead of directly confronting homosexuality and trying to understand why people might be homosexual, newspapers simply called it an immoral perversion and dubbed members of the LGBT+ community as “moral weaklings” and “sexual misfits.” Even *The Washington Post*, a renowned news organization today, simplified

Washington DC as a place that was, in the 1950s, “a haven for sexual perverts and degenerates” (*The Lavender Scare* 55). If there perhaps had been more journalists conducting balanced reporting, readers could have had the opportunity to think more critically about the issue and convince congressman to legislate more tolerant laws. As Nives Dolšak articulates though, by taking a stronger stance on one side over the other, the newspaper coverage at the time allowed increased legislative activity (Dolšak 287). Unfortunately, this increased legislative activity allowed government officials to fire their LGBT+ colleagues. With neither the public nor the press challenging society’s rampantly growing fears, politicians persisted to vigorously cleanse their departments of supposed security risks.

Though this may seem implausible to some, historical context helps to explain the mindset America had that enabled the Lavender Scare. After World War II, many began to question what it meant to be a man. The war itself brought some radical changes to gender roles. With men gone, fighting in both Europe and Japan, away for a time period significantly longer than the previous World War, many women were now allowed to get jobs. Subsequently, they discovered a new sense of freedom and independence. Thus, when the war was over, they did not want to return to their previous roles in the household. This challenge to traditional gender roles made many men begin to question masculine identity (Moore 8). Homosexuals were another challenge to the traditional male ideal, and therefore it made them dangerous. This notion was reinforced with everyone, from politicians to journalists, insisting over and over again that homosexuals were nothing but people with creepy predatory sexual habits. They did not win medals for their service, like Air Force Sgt. Leonard Matlovich, or get PhDs in astronomy from Harvard, like Frank Kameny (“Franklin E. Kameny” 210). They were degenerates, and nobody seemed inclined to say otherwise – therefore, if everyone believed this about the homosexuals, it

must have been true (Weaver 822). And when people believe that some are less than others, this can lead to callous decisions and disastrous consequences.

Specifically, it emboldened those with power to hurt LGBT+ people to meet their own ends – or as Senator Robert Kennedy put it, to “build their own lives on the shattered dreams of others” (Kennedy). With the Lavender Scare in particular, government officials mainly used interrogations to rid their department of homosexual security risks. This was particularly true within the State Department, which had been heavily criticized during President Harry Truman’s term as being filled with homosexuals. The State Department’s Bureau for Security and Consular Affairs, under the leadership of R.W. Scott McLeod, created a whole unit for this purpose. Called the “Miscellaneous M Unit,” its focus was on moral deviation. Specifically, there were two categories of moral deviation: homosexual and other. The unit interviewed everyone from applicants, to notice any “unusual” traits and mannerisms, to current employees, to make sure their department was clean of the perverts. If anything seemed suspicious, the Miscellaneous M Unit would force them to undergo a polygraph to prove their so-called innocence and help them find other perverts (*The Lavender Scare* 132). Interrogations could last up to four days, and many were not given the opportunity to seek advice of counsel because the officials framed the matter as an interview rather than an interrogation (Faderman 151). The supposed interview itself was highly invasive, with the interviewee being asked questions such as whether or not they were the “passive” or “active” partner in their sexual encounters (Fag Rag 13). If those suspected of being LGBT+ did not cooperate, they would likely never find a job again. Even in organizations outside the federal government, the federal government held an enormous amount of influence. Either they were contracted by the government for a possible multitude of reasons, or the job took place in territory the army occupied. Both examples required a government

security clearance, even if the job itself did not involve national security or classified materials (Faderman 147).

Even if the government did not intensely pursue the matter themselves in one's field of work, the mere mindset of society was widespread enough to limit LGBT+ people from being open about who they were. The Mattachine Society, a gay rights activist group created in response to the Lavender Scare, had its first case not because of a government matter, but rather that of police entrapment. A Los Angeles vice detective allegedly followed Dale Jennings a gay man, home and forced Jennings's hand down his pants before arresting Jennings for "lewd vagrancy" (Charles 266). At UCLA, the dean and assistant dean of students, upset at how private and public universities seemed to attract an incredible amount of LGBT+ people, published an article in the magazine *School and Society* urging students to leave if they did not seek psychiatric treatment (Faderman 155). On the other side of the country, in Florida, Miami and Tampa in particular, police forces cracked down aggressively on gay bars and other known gathering places. Meanwhile, Florida's state legislature formed their own version of an investigative committee to interrogate hundreds of faculty and student activists pulled right from class, again with no chance to meet with an attorney (Weiss 62). Even in Massachusetts, Smith College specifically, two professors were fired for their homosexuality (Eaklor 88).

Sixty-six years have passed though since the Lavender Scare era began. The Supreme Court has ruled in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that same-sex marriage is protected under the Constitution. Public opinion of the LGBT+ community continues to grow more positive and open than ever before. Yet much like those against women's reproductive rights, homophobes still exist. In fact, in a reaction similar to that of *Roe v. Wade*, homophobia mutated to adjust to the newer, sometimes more accepting, landscape. For instance, though same-sex marriage is legal now, the Texas House of Representatives considered passing a law that would ban

government provide funds for licensing or supporting same-sex marriage (Haider-Markel 45).

There is also the mere fact that not all fifty states have complete and comprehensive antidiscrimination laws for sexual orientation and gender identity. Some states, specifically along the East and West coasts and the northern Midwest, have these statutes in place. However, in many places across the rest of the country, getting married would out a same-sex couple and potentially make them susceptible to multiple discriminatory attacks. For instance, one or both of them could get fired from their job without any legal repercussions against their former employer. Because of the Supreme Court's decision *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, religious freedom could be considered a viable excuse for any landlord or business owner to deny a same-sex couple housing or other services, again without any base for legal consequences (46). As for trans people, marriage laws can get even more complicated for them, should their state legislature choose to pursue that route. For example, in some states like Ohio, lawmakers have prevented trans individuals from marrying a significant other of their birth sex (59).

Additionally, if the couples want to expand their family, they face more hurdles with adoption agencies. While heterosexual parents automatically get legal protections for their kids, this is not the case for same-sex parents. In Michigan, a bill got recently got passed that not only allowed for adoption agencies to refuse service to same-sex couples on religious groups, but also prevented the government from intervening in the situation (48). For children who are biologically related to one of the parents, or are only adopted by one parent, the other parent has no legal rights to child, complicating medical and custody issues that may arise in the future (Wesley 158). Ultimately though, the form of discrimination against the LGBT+ community that has not changed over time is hate crimes. According to recent available statistics, hate crimes stemming from sexual orientation only came in second to those stemming from race. However, because these statistics are not required to be sent in by local police departments and does not

include gender identity, the data still remains incomplete, therefore making it plausible to assume that violence against the LGBT+ community extends far beyond what is reported (Haider-Markel 53).

It would be nice to pretend that the Lavender Scare is simply a contained event in the timeline of American history. But to do so would be naïve, and ignorant of the event's widespread, lasting effects on a whole community of people. Things that happened several decades ago still affect us today. Things that happened several decades ago still happen today. While President Obama has not signed an executive order for the sole purpose of riding LGBT+ people from government service, politicians and civilians can still find creative ways to limit their rights. With vice president-elect Mike Pence and the rest of president-elect Donald Trump's Cabinet entering the White House this January, people may not have to be creative anymore to stop the sexual misfits.

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