

The Lavender Scare – The origin of the policy to exclude homosexuals from Federal service October 10

WARNING: This article quotes primary sources from the 1950s that used language and terminology many considered offensive today.

Many who have worked at NSA may know there was a time in which homosexuals were barred from holding a security clearance, or even from being employed by the Federal Government. While this discriminatory practice was generally discontinued in the civil service by 1978, it wasn't until 1995 that Executive Order 12968 prohibited discrimination for employment within the Intelligence Community based solely on sexual orientation. Today NSA's Security practices are vastly different from those of the past, but how did this come about and how did the newly formed NSA Security organization react and implement the executive directions and laws coming from the White House and Congress in the 1950s?

When people think of the civil service of the late 1940s and early 1950s, thoughts often go to the efforts of Senator Joseph P. McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) to uncover communists and subversives in the Federal Government. While it is true that there were communist spies in the Federal Government, the simultaneously running, but distinct, efforts by McCarthy and the HUAC were primarily motivated by a desire for attention-grabbing headlines and political wins. Known as the Red Scare, this episode was intertwined with what later became known as the "Lavender Scare." The Lavender Scare was defined by the intense anxiety of elected officials and the public that there were homosexuals employed in the civil service. Some believed homosexuals might be easily recruited by foreign intelligence services and communists or be easily blackmailed. Others believed they were simply unsuitable for government employment and a threat to traditional American values.

In his book, *The Lavender Scare*, author David K. Johnson explains how this concern grew in the 1930s and 1940s after sweeping changes caused by the New Deal and World War II seemed to throw American society on its head. The New

Deal programs brought unprecedented numbers of young, single, professionals (men and women) into Washington, D.C., where they found careers in the new bureaucracy. Tolerance towards homosexuals and females in the Federal workplace existed during the war years because it was more important to focus on winning the war. After the war however, this tolerance faded as new best-seller publications about sexual behaviors and newspaper headlines about sex crimes caused a growing panic about morals. By 1947, the U.S. Park Police initiated a "Pervert Elimination Campaign" targeted specifically at places like Lafayette Park which was frequented by openly (and not so openly) gay men. Then, Senator McCarthy exploded onto the public stage.

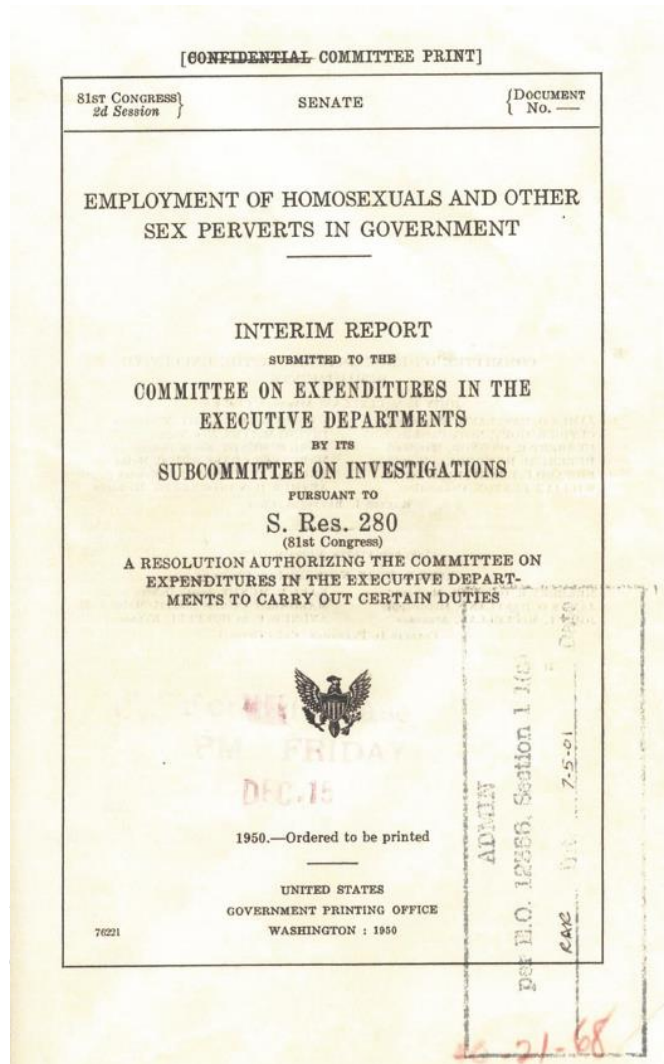
On 9 February 1950, Senator McCarthy delivered his "Enemies from Within" speech in Wheeling, West Virginia which equated communism with atheism and immorality. He described how communism was diametrically opposed to the "democratic Christian world" and "the great difference between our western Christian world and the atheistic Communist world is not political, gentleman, it is moral." He called for a "moral uprising" and a "new birth of honesty and decency in government." McCarthy lambasted President Truman and the administration for what he perceived as a weak loyalty program, under the 1947 Executive Order 9835. While McCarthy explicitly called out communists in his Wheeling speech, he only implicitly called out homosexuals (he would target homosexuals explicitly later). However, in the Congressional inquiries that followed his Wheeling speech, the Deputy Undersecretary for Administration at the State Department, John Peurifoy, reported that 91 individuals had been dismissed from the State Department between 1947 and 1949 because they were homosexual. They were dismissed under the McCarran rider attached to State and Defense Department

appropriations bills which allowed agencies to remove employees at their discretion for national security purposes.

The revelation that there were homosexuals in the civil service caused a public uproar. The U. S. Senate reacted by passing Senate Resolution No. 280 in June 1950 directing the Senate Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments to

“make a thorough and comprehensive study and investigation of (a) the alleged employment by the departments and agencies of the Government of homosexuals and other moral perverts, and (b) the preparedness and diligence of authorities of the District of Columbia, as well as the appropriate authorities of the Federal Government, for the protection of life and property against the threat to security, inherent in the employment of such perverts by such departments and agencies.”

The Committee on Expenditures promptly created the bipartisan Investigations Subcommittee, chaired by Senator Clyde R. Hoey of North Carolina. Generally known as the Hoey Committee, its task was to “determine the extent of the employment of homosexuals and other sex perverts in Government; to consider reasons why their employment by the Government is undesirable; and to examine into the efficacy of the methods used in dealing with the problem.”



The Hoey Committee held hearings, interviewing government officials from the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the intelligence sections of the US Army, Navy, and Air Force as well as members of the medical community. Their report, *“Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government,”* was published in December 1950 and provides insight into a perception off homosexuality during this time; namely that,

“persons afflicted with sexual desires which result in their engaging in overt acts of perversion should be considered as proper cases for medical and psychiatric treatment. However, sex perverts, like all other persons who by their overt acts violate moral codes and laws and the accepted standards of conduct, must be treated as transgressors and dealt with accordingly.”

The committee also determined that Government workers “must meet acceptable standards of personal conduct” and that “homosexuals and sex perverts are not proper persons to be employed in Government for two reasons; first they are generally unsuitable, and second, they constitute security risks.”

Referring to the Hoey report, Johnson notes,

“after months of investigation, the committee had discovered little evidence to back up this claim. It had never found a single example of a homosexual American citizen who had been blackmailed into revealing state secrets... Through the Hoey Committee’s final report, the notion that homosexuals threatened national security received the imprimatur of the U.S. Congress and became accepted as official fact. The report was sent to American embassies and foreign intelligence agencies around the world, became part of federal security manuals, and would be quoted for years by the government of the United States and its allies as justification for excluding homosexuals.”

The testimony given by security officials from the CIA, FBI, and military intelligence divisions gave no actual examples from their areas, but instead provided one tenuous example of an Austrian intelligence officer from the World War I era, followed by hypothetical scenarios where being homosexual could pose a security threat. This was evidence enough for the committee to believe that not

only were homosexuals “unsuitable” for government employment generally, they were also security risks when holding positions requiring access to classified national security information.

So how did this Congressional activity affect security practices at NSA? Find out in tomorrow’s *History Today*.

Sources:

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The CCH is ready to provide specific citations for each quotation in the article, upon request.