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The Power of Masculinity

Layla Talley

Senator Joseph McCarthy's Red Scare, in which he named individuals as Communists, caused a period of intense worry and suspicion. However, his notorious list of 205 names of Communists working for the United States government was ultimately unprovable. To save face with his colleagues and the American public, he changed his tactics, calling out those he was unable to trace back to Communism as being homosexual. This began what is now called the Lavender Scare.²⁸ According to McCarthy, homosexuals presented a huge security risk because of the ease with which they could be blackmailed; therefore, they could not be trusted to hold government jobs during a time when the threat of Communist infiltration was so high.²⁹ Although McCarthy was the man responsible for making the initial allegations, he was not the party responsible for rounding up the "sexual deviants" and questioning them. Clyde Hoey was recruited to lead the investigation, and according to the transcripts from the hearings, Roy Cohn was responsible for the majority of the questioning. It has been theorized by David Johnson in *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*,

²⁸ Roel van den Oever, *Mama's Boy: Momism and Homophobia in Postwar American Culture* (New York: McMillian, 2012), 28.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

that the reason McCarthy did not take charge himself is that he was concerned about a "boomerang" situation in which he would become the accused rather than the accuser.³⁰ There is no question that the Lavender Scare happened, and as a result, hundreds of individuals lost their jobs and were publicly shamed. The question is why did this happen? Why were homosexuals targeted specifically? Is it possible that the men most responsible for the Lavender Scare were simply overcompensating for their own sexual identities? Even though there is no concrete evidence that McCarthy was homosexual, rumors did circulate about McCarthy's deviant sexuality. Is it possible that these bruised his ego so terribly that he felt he had to respond harshly to the entire gay community? Was the Lavender Scare Joseph McCarthy's compensatory reaction to several shots at his masculinity? What were the lasting implications of the Lavender Scare in the United States?

What happened after the initial accusation of homosexual individuals working in the State Department has been referred to as a modern day witch hunt for gay government employees, a reference to the events in Salem, Massachusetts during the early 1690s.³¹

McCarthy's list of 81 gay individuals working in the State Department was only the beginning. The hysteria lasted about 25 years, and came to touch almost every person living in the Nation's capital by the end. Estimates were made of the total number of gay people living in Washington. The number varied from anywhere from 5,000 to

³⁰ David Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

50,000, depending on who was asked.³² Soon, the hysteria was not just contained to the State Department. The United States military began looking closely at its soldiers, and companies contracted by the government, even those not in the D. C. area, investigated employees. Senator Kenneth Wherry performed a study of civilians living in Washington. He reported, "an unusual, but containable, clique [of homosexuals]" in the city. The metropolitan police were also asked to index the name, address, occupation and age of almost 5,000 "suspected sex perverts" in the area.³³ A vice squad was created to investigate a possible link between homosexuality and Communism, but the government never agreed that the two were related. The individuals let go during this time due to their sexuality were officially fired because they were "uncommonly susceptible to blackmail."³⁴ About 20% of the total United States workforce had been interviewed and investigated in the three year period between when McCarthy named gays in the State Department and when President Eisenhower issued his order demanding that all homosexuals be terminated from the United States government with Executive order 10450.³⁵

It has been theorized by Roel van den Oever in his book, *Mama's Boy: Momism and Homophobia in Postwar American Culture*, that the reason homosexuality had become such a threatening idea was due to Alfred Kinsey. In the late 1940s, Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues developed a seven-step scale to determine an individual's level of homosexuality. This rejected prior concepts

³² Ibid., 87-90.

³³ Ibid., 80.

³⁴ Richard H. Rovere, *Senator Joe McCarthy* (New York: Harper & Publisher, 1959), 154.

³⁵ Oever, 30.

of homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual, and said that every person would fall somewhere on the scale. According to Kinsey's findings, 37% of men had some kind of homosexual experience, and after the age of 35, if the man is unmarried he is 50% more likely to have had a homosexual experience to the point of orgasm.³⁶ These numbers terrified the public, and led them to reject their prior notion that a homosexual male was easily detected because of his obvious flamboyant nature. This meant that now, anyone could be a homosexual, and they were virtually undetectable. This fact elevated suspicion, particularly in the Cold War context of fear. In essence, Kinsey's study, meant to normalize homosexuals, had instead led the public to believe homosexuals were an undetectable threat lying in wait.³⁷ The Cold War produced a general climate of fear in the United States. Americans were constantly on alert and in constant fear of attack from the Soviet Communists. Also, thanks to McCarthy, the fear that Communists were lurking behind every corner was instilled in the minds of Americans. The findings presented by Kinsey during this period not only worsened the already present fear of Communism, but also gave Americans another enemy in the homosexual. The need to maintain an unsullied reputation in the United States became compulsory. Preying upon the fears of others, in order to achieve this spotless type of reputation, some individuals began accusing others of things like being Communist or engaging in deviant sexual practices, and became hostile toward any lifestyle different from their own.

³⁶ Ibid., 24-25.

³⁷ Ibid., 24-27.

In order to answer the question of whether overcompensation played a role in the cultivation of the Lavender Scare, it is important to consider the concept and its implications generally. Overcompensation, or an "excessive reaction to a feeling of inferiority, guilt, or inadequacy leading to an exaggerated attempt to overcome the feeling," seems to match the context of the Cold War.³⁸ Robb Willer, a PhD candidate at Cornell University, determined that men become more "macho" acting if masculinity is threatened. Willer noted that these threatened men feel guilt, shame, and often become outwardly hostile.³⁹ Some men may become violent or discriminatory as a result of this overcompensation.⁴⁰ Acting in a homophobic way is a tool some men employed to promulgate heterosexuality and further distance themselves from homosexuals.⁴¹ Aggression associated with homophobia may not even be related to a hatred for homosexuals, but a negative reaction to the perceived threat to the individuals' masculinity.⁴²

Essentially, if a man perceives that his masculinity is being threatened in any way, he will most likely react aggressively, and if the threat

³⁸ *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged*, (Springfield, MA: Merriam- Webster, 1993), Also available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>.

³⁹ "Men Overcompensate for Masculinity Threats," *UPI Newstrack (Consumer Health) Regional Business News*, EBSCO host (accessed December 3, 2014).

⁴⁰ Christopher N. Kendall, *Gay Male Pornography: An Issue of Sex Discrimination* (Canada: UBC Press, 2004), 103.

⁴¹ John M. Levine and Michael A. Hogg ed., *Encyclopedia of Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* (Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi: SAGE Publications Inc., 2010), 408.

⁴² Julie L. Nagoshi, Craig T. Nagoshi, and Stephanie Buzuzy, *Gender and Sexual Identity: Transcending Feminist and Queer Theory* (New York: Springer Science Business Media, 2014), 43.

holds any truth, the reaction will be amplified.⁴³ This is a plausible reason for why Joseph McCarthy took the initiative to seek out and destroy the careers of homosexual individuals working for the United States government.

Although McCarthy took care to remove himself from the investigations conducted during the Lavender Scare, rumors of his own homosexuality were rampant. Some rumors included his sending his staff away on vacations in order to have time alone with his male lovers, or allegedly kissing a male member of the Wisconsin Young Republicans. Journalist Edwin Bayley admitted in his book, *Joe McCarthy and the Press*, that the publication he worked for during the Scare, the *Journal*, received several affidavits from men claiming to have engaged in homosexual activities with McCarthy. However, they were never considered for publication.⁴⁴ The reason for the exclusion of these affidavits could be anything from a payoff to fear on the part of the editors, but a reason was never stated. Since McCarthy was unable to satisfy his homosexual urges, he was reportedly mentally and physically abusive toward

⁴³ A study conducted in 1996 showed a group of homophobic, heterosexual males that were shown homosexual male intercourse were physiologically aroused while a group of non-homophobic, heterosexual males shown the same content showed no reaction. Jeffrey A Bernat, Karen S Calhoun, Henry E. Adams, and Amos Zeichner, 2001 "Homophobia and Physical Aggression Toward Homosexual and Heterosexual Individuals," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 110 no. 1: 179-187, 179.

⁴⁴ Edwin Bayley, *Joe McCarthy and the Press* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 134.

women, and he hired the young and handsome David Schine.⁴⁵ His inexplicably close relationship with Schine ultimately caused his (and Cohn's) fall from power in Washington when they were accused of pressuring the United States Army to give special treatment to Schine. Both McCarthy and Cohn accused the United States army of holding Schine hostage after Schine was drafted as a private, and the army refused to meet demands from Cohn which included extra leave, light duties, and a commission.⁴⁶ These accusations, which were never proven or disproven, challenged his masculinity, a reality made worse by the fact that he was an unmarried middle aged man. According to Kinsey, that meant he was 50% more likely to engage in homosexual activities.

In response, McCarthy was known to speak harshly about homosexuals, often seeking to emasculate other men. He purportedly called the Secretary of State a "striped pants asshole," and described members of the State Department whose careers he was destroying as, "cookie pushers." To close friends he revealed that he believed their "'silk handkerchief approach' and 'prancing' was useless against the Soviets."⁴⁷ The use of derogatory terms in reference to homosexuals was an effort by McCarthy to secure his own masculinity by destroying the masculinity of others.

In fact, the man McCarthy put in charge of the fight to remove all homosexuals from government, Roy Cohn, was later

⁴⁵ Arthur Herman, *Joseph McCarthy: Reexamining the Life and Legacy of America's Most Hated Senator* (United States: The Free Press, 2000), 235-236.

⁴⁶ Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (United States of America: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 150.

⁴⁷ Herman, *Joseph McCarthy*, 186.

proven to be a closeted homosexual. While he spent his days verbally attacking individuals accused of being gay, he spent his nights at various gay bars in the Washington area. He never fully admitted his sexual preference, and he justified his actions by saying he preferred to "expand his sexual energies on men, not women," but he was no 'pansy.'"⁴⁸ By this, he meant even though he engaged in sexual relations with men, he did not consider himself to be homosexual because he was a better man than that. During the actual senate hearings pertaining to the higher risk of employing homosexuals, Cohn was often condescending and accusatory in his line of questioning. McCarthy, who presided over most of the hearings, allowed this line of questioning with no objections. In the case of Eric L. Kohler, for example, Cohn delved into Mr. Kohler's personal life, and presented personal letters that had absolutely nothing to do with his job as evidence.⁴⁹ Cohn also used the technique of frequently repeating Mr. Kohler's responses to him for emphasis and intimidation.⁵⁰ By questioning Mr. Kohler in this manner, Cohn was able to easily confuse Kohler, and made him appear to be lying.

The damage done during the Lavender Scare was felt by hundreds of men and women during the Cold War period, but has only recently been studied in earnest. The anti-gay hysteria which was dominant in the 1940s and 1950s caused people to turn against each

⁴⁸ Ibid., 218.

⁴⁹ United States Government, *Executive Sessions of the Senate Subcommittee on Government Operations*, Eighty- Third Congress 1953-1954, vol. 1, 423.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 425-426.

other. For example, one woman accused her boss of being a lesbian based on absurd reasons which included

"peculiar lips, not large, but odd shaped," "a funny feeling," the fact that she was "single" and "had spent a lot of time in China," "a deep voice, an unusual face for a woman," and the fact that she "[had] very little in the way of hips."⁵¹ Also, as with the Salem witch hunt, any accusation resulted in a full, and often unfair investigation. Most of the accused individuals in the State Department resigned before they could be fired, and were therefore not recorded, so the actual number of individuals who lost jobs during this time remains unclear.⁵² Congress declared that, in order to insure "sexual perverts" were not hired by the United States government again, their screening process and background checks would become more strict and inclusive. They also blamed the initial problem on the lax procedures for checking into the background of potential employees.⁵³

Another result of this mass hysteria was that homosexuals became synonymous with sexual predators, especially pedophiles. In a public service announcement called "Boys Beware," released in 1958, adolescent and teen boys and their parents were warned of the dangers presented by gay men. It and short films like it were produced by local police departments to be viewed in schools.⁵⁴ They equated homosexuality with a contagious disease that could be

⁵¹ Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 119-121.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 166.

⁵³ United States Government, *Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government*, Eighty-First Congress, 15 December, 1950, 8-14.

⁵⁴ Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 140.

caught if they were too close. It also suggested that all homosexual males are only interested in young boys.⁵⁵ In the film, the narrator used terminology suggesting that the young impressionable boys were forced by older homosexuals to engage in deviant acts as "payment."⁵⁶ Although this was directed at teenagers and adolescents, it also scared parents of children that age. Propaganda like this ensured the American public would continue to be scared by the thought of homosexuality.

Not all of the results of the Lavender Scare were bad. Actions taken by gay and lesbian individuals in reaction to government persecution became the seeds of the gay rights movement. Long before the Stonewall riots in 1969, a series of riots brought about by brutal police action at the Stonewall Inn gay bar in Greenwich Village, the Lavender Scare prompted the founding of the first gay organization to be sustained: The Mattachine Society.⁵⁷ Its location in southern California was also important, since it was in an area the government depended on for defense work. This organization also helped to radicalize the movement in Washington in the 1960s.⁵⁸ A series of "homophile" organizations sprang up in large United States cities including New York, San Francisco, Detroit, Chicago, Boston, and even Washington D.C. They were also Mattachine chapters and were led by Harry Hay in the

⁵⁵ Sid Davis, *Boys Beware*, Online Streaming, Internet Archive, 1958.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 1.

⁵⁸ Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 13.

early 1950s.⁵⁹ The chapter of Mattachine in D.C. was formed as a response to the persecution of homosexuals in the United States government. Their literature was initially directed at the local gay community in the early 1950s, but by the latter half of the 1960s, this chapter along with other organizations pressured the Civil Service Commission to end its discrimination against homosexuals.⁶⁰ Hay was also instrumental in the publication of the first pro-gay magazine, *ONE*, in Los Angeles in 1954.⁶¹ These organizations were fueled by the Lavender Scare, and they planted the initial seeds of the gay rights movement in the United States.

Evidence shows that during the Lavender Scare, Senator Joseph McCarthy's masculinity was threatened by several sets of rumors of him engaging in homosexual activities. He was accused of inappropriate behavior with young men, and his age and marital status led to uncomfortable questions after the Kinsey's scale was circulated. His closest colleague, Cohn, was later proven to be a homophobic closeted homosexual. Though McCarthy was not the one questioning the individuals during the hearings, he never made an effort to stop the invasive and harsh line of questioning, which was likely an effort to protect himself as well as his masculinity. Even if McCarthy was not homosexual (there is no concrete evidence to prove he was), it is still possible that his masculinity was

⁵⁹ Leah J. Rupp and Susan K. Reeman ed., *Understanding and Teaching U.S. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 219.

⁶⁰ Landon R. Storrs, *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 197-198.

⁶¹ Craig M. Loftin, *Masked Voices: Gay Men and Lesbians in Cold War America* (Albany: State University of New York, 2012), 1.

sufficiently threatened to cause him to employ the tactics of overcompensation. So, could the Lavender Scare be a result of Joseph McCarthy's overcompensation due to several shots at his masculinity? The answer is yes, when examining the definition of overcompensation and the ways in which it may be present, Senator Joseph McCarthy certainly does exhibit signs of overcompensation. Considering the general climate of fear during the Cold War period, the publication of Kinsey's work, Cohn's homosexuality, and the rumors of McCarthy's homosexuality, it is very likely that he overcompensated which resulted in the Lavender Scare. This fact had both tragic implications for hundreds of government and government contracted employees, but also set into motion the basis of the gay rights movement in the United States.