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Book Review: The Lavender Scare: The Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government

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The Lavender Scare: The Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government. By David L. Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. xii + 277 pp. Photographs, illustrations, notes, index. \$30.00.

Few people are aware that the McCarthyite "Red Scare" of the fifties was paralleled by a "Lavender Scare" that led to a purge of gay men and lesbians employed by federal agencies. But David Johnson, in his admirably researched new study, tells us that three-quarters of the

25,000 letters received by Senator Joseph McCarthy expressed concern with homosexuals in government rather than Communists. How did that come about?

It happened because on February 11, 1950, Senators investigating Communist influence elicited from Undersecretary John Peurifoy an admission that ninety-one homosexuals had been discharged from the State Department. Following McCarthy's claim a month earlier to have found 205 Communists in the same department, this caused a second sensation. As Johnson puts it, "Originating as a partisan political weapon in the halls of Congress, [this revelation] sparked a moral panic within mainstream American culture and became the basis for a federal government policy that lasted twenty-five years and affected innumerable people's lives." Deemed "security risks" because they might, in theory, be in danger of blackmail, homosexuals were held to be unemployable by the federal government.

Crucial to this campaign were the efforts of Senator Kenneth S. Wherry of Nebraska who had indeed quietly spearheaded the attack on gay personnel since 1947. Wherry, a fierce crusader regarded by many as the "Mr. Republican" of his day, had been elected to the Senate in 1942 (defeating incumbent Senator George W. Norris), made whip in 1944, and minority leader from 1949 till his death in 1951. Passionately opposed to the New Deal, which he saw as a corrupting influence on American life, he styled himself "the expert on homosexuality in the State Department" and soon caused a sensation of his own when he subpoenaed a vice squad officer who estimated there might be over three thousand homosexuals employed by the U.S. government.

Later, under the Eisenhower program to "clean house in Washington," Johnson estimates that about 5,000 gay men and lesbians lost their jobs and had their lives and careers ruined after living apprehensively under a reign of terror. Throughout the early years of the scare Wherry was seconded by another Nebraskan, Representative Arthur Miller, who gave impassioned speeches in the state

to deplore the menace. But Plains politicians were not only the instigators of the purge, they were sometimes also its victims. Senator Lester Hunt of Wyoming, a Democrat up for reelection in 1954, committed suicide after charges were laid against his son as a way of persuading the senator to withdraw from the race.

The "Lavender Scare" subsided but the dismissal of homosexuals continued until the 1970s when, as a result of suits brought by newly organized homosexual civil rights groups formed in response to the persecution, the courts ruled that the government must show some "rational nexus" between employees' private behavior and their ability to serve the government: vague charges of "immoral conduct" would not suffice. The final irony was that during the years when "national security" was used as a justification for dismissing homosexuals, not a single instance came to light of a homosexual's being blackmailed by a foreign power.

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